
MICROCOSM



2005

Spring

Volume 32



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Spring 2005

Volume 32

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Dayne Sherman

The Microcosm staff is proud to feature Dayne Sherman as the featured author for the 2004-2005 publication. Mr. Sherman currently teaches at Southeastern Louisiana University. His first novel *Welcome to the Fallen Paradise* was released in October 2004. Additionally, his fiction has appeared in *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, *Fourteen Hills: The San Francisco State University Review*, *The Distillery*, *Country Roads Magazine*, *The Powhatan Review*, and *Blue Moon Café III: An Anthology of Southern Writers*.



Illustrator: Becky Cobb

contents

Staff	1
Featured Author	3

poetry

Damaged	7
A Different Kind	9
A Voiceless Scream	10
Chaos	11
Word to the Wise	13
What if?	14
Delta Soul	15
Zero	16

short story

The Striped Culotte	17
Barely Goodbye	21
A Long Ride Home	28
It's Not Always Gonna Be Sunny and 75 Degrees	32
Precious	39
I Can Spot One	45
Returning Like a Dog	49
The Diary of Eve	53
The Snake	62

essay

A Stereotypical White Male	69
The Wasteland of Don Quixote	71

The Weaknesses of a Master	76
----------------------------	----

drama

A Portrait of a Soldier	79
-------------------------	----

Just Another Guy	83
------------------	----

Thanks-Giving	89
---------------	----

cover art Amanda Stevenson

Damaged

ANNA C. SMITH

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

poetry

None of it really means anything.

Nothing unusual

no feelings

just empty words.

A blended heart

that keeps beating

not worthless

but just enough

to start healing

without anyone's help.

No need for you.

No need for anyone

who may be like you.

It's fine. See?

No damage was done.

The heart will be fixed

but never the same.

Who would want it

anyway ? You did.

You took it, used it, and gave it back.

It's okay.

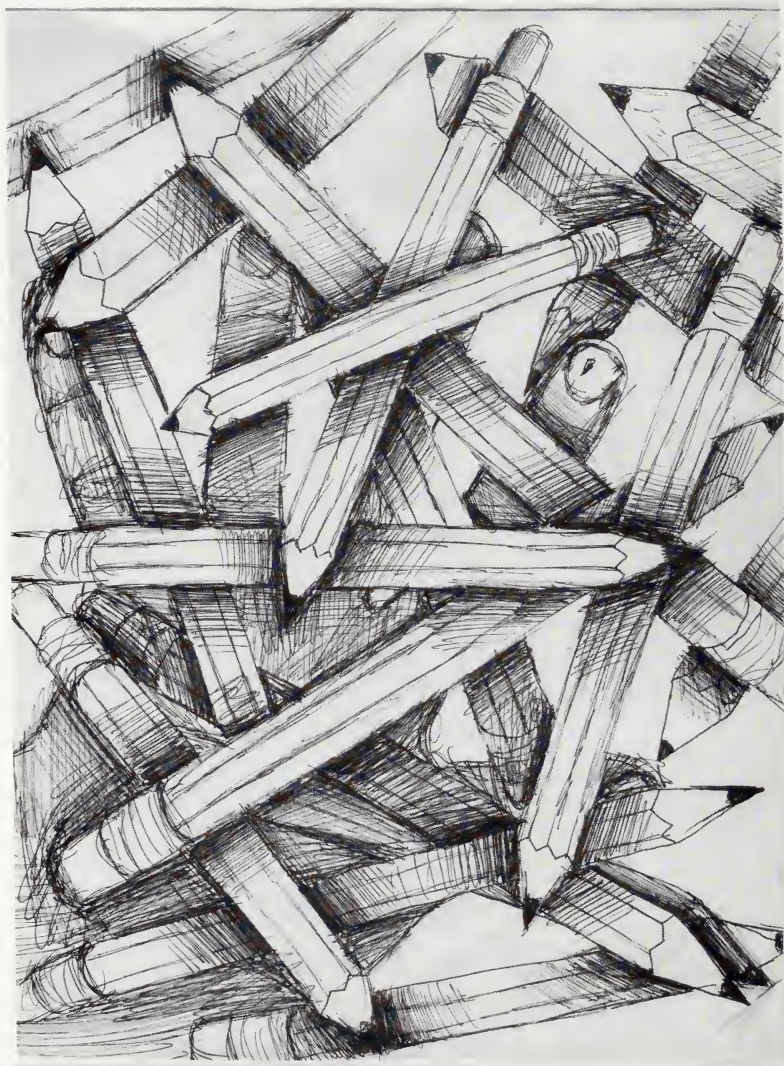
You got what you thought you wanted.

All that is left is a heart

with no trust, no feelings.

Don't worry.

No damage was done.



Illustrator: Garrett May

A Different Kind

SHIRA MARCUS

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Years of torment

Months of rage

Days of sadness

Moments caged

Life suppressed

By one single man

Bruises made

By one single hand

Is it something learned

Or something had

That makes a person

So viciously mad

It captures the mind

And turns it around

It swallows a person

Than pushes them down

What? You say

Could consume the soul

It's love I tell you

Love in its whole

A Voiceless Scream

MAMIE COSPER

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

I roam and pace and walk the floor in fear, in dread, in silent prayer.

Up and down the white tiled halls, past the lights and painted walls.

Take my hand and touch the fear upon my brow.

Voices deep inside my head chant and sing their siren song
Harried by this mournful call, I drag my feet and move along.

I shriek in silent torment, life's truths consist of lies.
And empty days, of empty hours, pass before my eyes.
Take my hand; embrace my deep despair.

Within the barren void I find, the time to flee, a place to hide.
Help me, hold me, please, I plead, but your open arms are closed to me.

Trapped within this bleak respite I face my deepest fears.
Alone, forgotten, deserted no one wipes my tears
Take my hand; set free my heart, my soul.

For deep within an empty sigh, a voiceless scream, and unheard cry.
I lay and dream, within a dream, of a life I wish were mine.

Chaos

MEGAN RUSSELL

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Hysteria, mass hysteria
So many voices, louder and louder
All saying different words
Running together—chaos
Pure chaos.

Why won't it stop?
The voices keep coming
Death, drugs, sex; death, drugs, sex
It's so hard to understand,
But I hear every word
Every voice
Every sound.

I wish it to go away, but
It's still here
Even after it's over,
It's still here

How do you stay sane
With all these voices
And all this craziness?
How can you not fall—
Fall into the pit of
Hysteria, mass hysteria



Illustrator: Sara Cochran

Word to the Wise

ZAK TILLOTSON

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A woo of death calms the qualm of complacency,
while in this land of illusion silence is the shudder
on every window of opinion. Torn down is the
praise that was given to the kings on the west side
of dawn. I'm just another man in this battle for
human existence; another statistic in these days of
ballistic characteristics.

I think we missed it-the chance to gut the
gluttenous kings who yank the hooks in our mouths
until our faces go green. Another obscene scene,
another scheme, another spleen poisoned by the
new world kings, another green eyed monster,
another ring master taunter, another sleep walking
hunter, a mantra of ignorance.

The belligerent kings of war are turning America
into an imperial land whore. Settle the score. The
day reckoning is coming. The day of the proletariat
king, a day to sing and rejoice, a day we finally have
a voice. The time to stand is now, against the
dictator's blight, cast out the blinded eyes, and
discover a new sight.

What if?

MAMIE COSPER

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

What if one day you realized you were like a swing?

You carry around the weight of other's not worried about your own.

Back and forth, stirring up some dust here and there.

Having people stomping in your puddles, and using you for games.

Swinging you around the poles.

Pushing you higher than you are willing to go.

But then when it's all over you are to sit in the cold.

Waiting for the next day.

When someone new comes along and plays with your heart.



Illustrator: Colt Covington

Delta Soul

ANDREW MULLEN SCOTT

BROOKHAVEN, MISSISSIPPI

I get this bizarre feeling every time I'm watching the gray moss
Swing to and fro from an old oak tree.
It's the same sense I get when I spend long nights
Looking up at the starry southern sky.
I can feel it follow me as I stroll down the old antebellum homes of
Brookhaven's South Jackson Street.
It's the same one that haunts me while I roam
Down that of Beale and Bourbon Street.
It's the same one I feel when I listen to
Jimmy Buffett, B.B. King, and Elvis Presley.
It's the same one I get when I read Grisham and Walker,
Faulkner and Wright, Morris and Welty.

From New Orleans up to Memphis,
From Natchez on to Meridian.
I can feel it lurking inside.
I feel it in my jazz in the mornings.
I feel it in my Blues at night.
It catches me as I walk about Biloxi
To fill my gaze with another lovely Southern bell.
It tingles at the sight of Magnolias
And at river boats on down the Mississippi.
It's even in the scent of Honeysuckle Vines.
I feel a delta soul inside.
And that delta soul feels-Might Fine.

Zero

LANCE DEVILLE

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

How would you like to be in this world, but not exist.

To have a name, but no meaning of the title.

To have a place, but not to know what it is.

How would you like to be known to the world but forgotten in an instance.

To be the start of infinity, but be lost in the distance.

To be the holder of a space, but not have a space to hold.

How would you like to be a negative and positive influence, but be considered as neither.

To be in existence just for show, but not paid any attention.

To be what no one wants to be, but be needed.

How would you like to be **ZERO**.

The Striped Culotte

KATIE WAINWRIGHT

HAMMOND, LOUISIANA

short stories

That morning Catalina put on a new culotte made from good quality cotton with a narrow blue and white stripe design. Two ruffled straps buttoned in front at the waist and went over the shoulders, crossed in back and re-buttoned at the waist. The outfit was difficult to fasten; the buttonholes not yet stretched by wear, constructed under the waistband so that the closure wouldn't show. Catalina hadn't wanted to wear it.

"Your mother made this for you," Carmen, the grumpy nanny, said. "With her own hands and great motherly love. You are wearing it."

Late in the afternoon, released from the tedium of the American School seventh grade, Catalina and her classmates played hide and seek. She left the perimeter of her yard and slipped into the wooded area sloping gently to the river, the knee-high brush scraping against her legs. She walked under the guava tree, and the vultures draping the limbs in black made whirring, disturbed noises. The ugly birds slit the juicy fruit with their curved beaks, devoured the soft pulp, and let the rind fall to the ground.

She nearly crouched behind a dense growth of ironweeds, the big, flat leaves a perfect screen. But then she remembered the snake Carmen had killed last week in the ironweeds surrounding the ceiba tree in the back yard, and thought better of it. It was a harmless chicken snake, big around as Catalina's thigh. When it uncoiled and raised up, Eduardo, the gardener, jumped back six feet. Carmen grabbed the machete out of his hand, and with one expert swing cut off the snake's head. The way she wielded the razor-sharp blade made Eduardo look bad and insulted his machismo. He sulked for days. Carmen wasn't afraid of snakes or anything else.

A tall clump of *mariposas*, delicate white ginger lilies with fluttering petals shaped like butterflies, seemed a safer hiding place. The flowers' strong, cloying scent repelled closeness. The plants liked wet feet and Catalina's leather sandals sank into the muddy soil. Nearby, a clear, shallow stream with no name gurgled over moss-covered rocks and fallen tree trunks.

Settling down, Catalina waited expectantly to be found.

The tropical heat rose in shimmering waves, sapping the life out of every moving creature. Birds looking for shade hid in the leafy overhead canopy, not twittering. Frogs sank into cool ditches and saved their energy for nighttime croaking. Lizards hiding in the ferns changed their skins from brown to cooler green. At sunset, when the heat waned, hunger would force the little creatures to stir about again.

Echoes drifted through the mahogany, ceiba and banyan trees. Catalina heard the others calling, "I caught you!" and the trills and laughter as the found one-stepped out of the hiding place.

A cacophony of yells reached her ears. "Catalina! Cata! Lina! Lina! Catica!" With each shout she burrowed deeper into her hiding place, victory at hand.

The calls became fainter, then ceased. She knew the ploy. Make her think they'd all gone away, so she'd pop her head out of this perfect hiding place and get caught.

Bones still, skin taut, breath held, she waited without moving, listening for a falling step, a snapping twig, a flap of the vultures' wings. After quite a while when nothing happened, she rose slowly and peered over the ginger lilies. A languorous quiet enveloped the late afternoon. The humid air hung heavy and still.

She was looking straight ahead, gazing fixedly at every bush and tree trunk, when suddenly from behind, a heavy arm encircled her waist, an arm covered with hairy swirls like black widow spiders.

Not the arm of a classmate.

She shrieked as the arm jerked her up with great force, lifting her off the ground, dangling legs kicking air, body tight against his.

The vultures flapped their wings and shook the guava tree.

A rough hand muffled Catalina's scream. The armpit smell of his body gagged her.

Wriggle out of this grip. Kick where it hurts. Take a look at his face so the Guardia Rural can stand him blindfolded in front of the brown-stained concrete wall.

She raised her arm, fingers stiff, and jabbed where she thought his eyes should be. Her hand slapped his beard, not a soft, silky beard like her grandfather's, but a rough, stubby growth, uneven and unkempt.

Her resistance made him angry. His breath came in short snorts and smelled foul. He threw Catalina on the damp earth. She rolled to one side. He pinned her down with a knee on her chest, one mud-encrusted boot planted firmly on the ground.

He bungled the attempt to rip off her clothes. Her mother was an excellent seamstress. She double-stitched all garments. She bought only good strong cloth, indestructible material that wore well and lasted forever.

The man fumbled with the culotte's buttons. Two in the front waistband, two in the back. He didn't know the combination. Rough hands with jagged nails tore her skin.

A scream stuck in the girl's throat, a painful lump of arrested breath.

He found a hidden button, jerked, but it, too, was sewn to stay. His fingers worked at passing the button through the buttonhole. Her mother made very tight buttonholes. It took many washings before they loosened up.

The pressure of the man's knee drove Catalina into the earth. Mud matted her hair and smeared her face. Her fingers groped the wet ground and her struggles left brown streaks on his clothing.

He undid the waistband's second button, flung the ruffled straps aside, and reached into his pants.

The panicked scream that tore from Catalina's frozen throat sent the vultures flying off the guava tree. Their wide spread wings covered the sun like a black shroud.

Camouflaged trousers, mud-covered, torn, wet. Important to

remember that. Wet. He came from the river. Must remember that, and the beard, and the

His full weight struck her body with the force of a falling boulder, and he toppled, unbalanced, to one side. She saw the arm fly left and fall to the ground, fingers clutching air. A warm gush soaked her blue and white striped culotte.

Catalina looked up and in dizzying circles saw green leaves and patches of sapphire sky and the silver glint of a machete dripping red.



Illustrator: Jacquelyn Berry

Barely Goodbye

ANNA C. SMITH

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

He laid there, still, in the cold hospital bed. He looked around the pale yellow room. A stroke had sent Ronald there a week earlier, and a fever of 107 degrees had kept him there. He looked out the window at the gray sky. Any minute, he knew, the floodgates of Heaven would open up, and water would begin to fall. He had always like the rain. It reminded him of Sarah. His lovely Sarah. He looked around the room again and realized she was not there.

"She must've gone to get her a cup a coffee," he thought.

His thought returned to the outside. He saw lightening lash across the sky. "Any minute now," he thought.

His mind drifted back, back to his and Sarah's first date. It was autumn 1955, and they had just left the picture show. He could not remember what film they had seen, but he remembered everything about her. She was dressed in a pale blue cotton dress, with a matching ribbon in her hair that pulled her golden blonde hair away from her face. Her beautiful face. It had taken him over a month to finally ask her out because every time he would look at her he would forget everything he had rehearsed saying. He finally got the nerve one day, and when she smiled and laughed politely and said, "Well it took you long enough to ask me, I guess it would be a shame if I didn't," he could not believe it.

The night has gone by too quickly, though, and as he began to walk her home, it began to rain. Not a hard rain, just enough to get someone soaked as they walked in it. He thought she would have gotten upset at her getting wet, because he knew how particular she was about it, but she just laughed and twirled around in it. He wanted to just stand back and watch her, but she would not allow it. She asked him to dance, and he simply could not tell her "no." So, they danced, all the way to her house. He was still a little scared of her, so he did not even think about trying to kiss her. So, he shook her hand goodnight and walked

back to his house. He laughed at this memory now. Forty-nine years and two children later, their love was as strong as ever. He could not wait to get out of this bed and return to his home.

Later that day, he watched as his children walked in. He remembered when each of them was born. The joy that he had felt in those moments now returned to him. Kevin, born on that hot summer day in the middle of July, and Molly, born on that snowy winter morning in the start of February. Just like the months they were born in, so were they. No two people were as different as they were. Kevin was always making someone laugh, and he had a heart for little children, too. He would guard his little sister almost anywhere, except at home, of course, because he always vied for the attention from their parents. He eventually got older, but did not exactly grow up, and got married to a police officer named Loraine. He, too, became a police officer and started one of the first anti-tobacco programs for kids after school. Molly, on the other hand, was a lot more composed. She spoke when she was spoken to, and laughed only when it was appropriate. Her hobby of photography as a teenager later became her career. She began to do freelance for different magazines after she got married to a youth minister named Trevor.

Ronald looked at them now, all grown up. His children now had children of their own, Kevin with two boys, and Molly with one girl and three boys. He could tell they had been crying, and he wondered for what reason. His daughter sat down next to him and held his hand. Kevin stood behind her.

"Hi Daddy," she said. "I love you." Tears began to fill her eyes.

"Don't cry over me," he wanted to say, but his voice would not let him speak.

"I don't know what I'm going to do without you, but I know you'll be watching over me," she continued. She really did not know what she would do. He had always given her anything she needed, and he was always there when she called. If she ran out of milk, he would grab the carton out of his own refrigerator and bring it to her.

"Molly Dolly, I'm not going anywhere." He wanted so much to tell her that he was always going to be there, but the words

simply would not come out. "I'll see you when I get there," she whispered as she leaned over and kissed his cheek. Then she turned and buried her face in her brother's shoulder. Kevin had never been a very emotional person, but he slowly raised his arms around her. He tried to postpone the inevitable for as long as he could. Once Molly quit sobbing, he let her go. It was now his turn.

"How you doin', ole man?" he light-heartedly said.

"Just swell," he thought. "Don't you worry 'bout me. I'll be getting' outta here before you know it." Again, the words would not come out. He became frustrated. He wanted to try to speak, but his strength was gone. So, he just laid there and listened to what his son had to say.

"So, this is it," he began. "Well, I'm not very good with words so I guess I'll come on out with it." His eyes slowly lifted from the floor, where they had been locked ever since he entered the room. He looked at his father, lying there helplessly. It was the first time he had seen him powerless, dependent on everyone else and not able to do anything for himself. He hated seeing him like this. Where was his invincible dad? The man that could do anything? The only thing Kevin could say was, "Love ya."

He patted him on the shoulder as he stood up, not sure of what to do next. Ronald lifted his hand and put it atop of his son's. Kevin continued to stare at the wall in fear that if he looked down at his father he would crumble. He had no choice, though. He looked down for just long enough. He could not help but to bend down and embrace him. Ronald was caught off guard. He had never seen his son like this before. He knew something must have been wrong, terribly wrong. Kevin pulled back and turned around to Molly.

They both waited there with him for the rest of the day. They swapped stories of kids, and relived old memories of their own childhood. Ronald listened and watched. It was the only thing he could do. He began to realize that his time was running out. This was one of the last times that he would see his children here on this earth. He grew angry and irritated. The daylight gradually faded and the clouds cleared so the stars could come out. His children were still there when he drifted back to sleep, but not before he looked at them one long time, possibly the last.

He woke up the next morning, wondering why he was still here. His children were gone, and the sun was shining through his window. He did not want to be here. He wanted to be at his own house, waking up in his own bed, next to his gorgeous wife. He missed his house, his lake, his dogs, and his yard that his Sarah had been constantly working on. It never seemed to ever be finished. He longed to go back there, but it could never be. He knew this deep down, but he still prayed for a miracle. He did not want to leave his Sarah, his family, his life.

He was only sixty-six years old. It was not his time. There were so many things he wanted to do, like watch his grandkids grow up. His beautiful grandkids. Out of the six, he had only one girl. One beautiful girl named Carrie. She was the picture perfect image of her mother, Molly. Now the boys could be a bit rambunctious, but she could hold her own. He almost began to cry just thinking about her. She would have to look after his Sarah. Not that she would need any help, but he knew how lonely she would get in that house all by herself. They were both retired, so without him to cook for and talk to, she would have to keep busy on her own. Ronald did not want to leave her like that. He prayed that he would have just a few more days, a few more days to spend with his Sarah. Then he would go without a fight. He looked out the window and got lost in the sunlight as he fell back to sleep.

He was in a fog for the rest of the day, coming in and out of consciousness. He heard doctors and nurses going in and out, saying things to his wife, but he could not understand them. When he did finally wake up, the room was empty yet again. He stared at the ceiling for what seemed like an eternity. After what felt like hours, the door opened and his Sarah walked in. He nearly lost his breath at the sight of her. It was like seeing her for the very first time, and he smiled. She was wearing a pale blue dress, and had a matching ribbon in her hair. She walked over and leaned down to kiss him.

"I love you," she said. He wanted desperately to say it back. He could hear the tears and pain in her voice. How could he leave her behind? She sat down next to him on the bed and grabbed his hand. "We've been through so much. How can I say goodbye?" She barely got the words out before the tears came. He

hated to see her like this. He had always done anything he could to ease her pain, but this was one time he could not.

She stared out the window, and he could tell she was thinking about what to say next. He stared at her, knowing that she wanted to say something, but the words would not come. He knew she loved him; she did not have to say anything else. They have been together for forty-nine years, so there really was not anything left to say. The fact that she was there was good enough for him.

They sat there until the sky grew dark. He had had a lot of time to think, and he finally had come to a conclusion. He knew what he had to do. He had to let go. He had to finally accept what was unavoidable. He was going to die. He was not going to be here any longer. He would not see his family, his Sarah, and she was not going to see him anymore. He had been scared this whole time that once he had to come to this realization, then it would come true, and it had.

He squeezed her hand. She took her gaze away from the window, where it had been for so long, and she bent down to him.

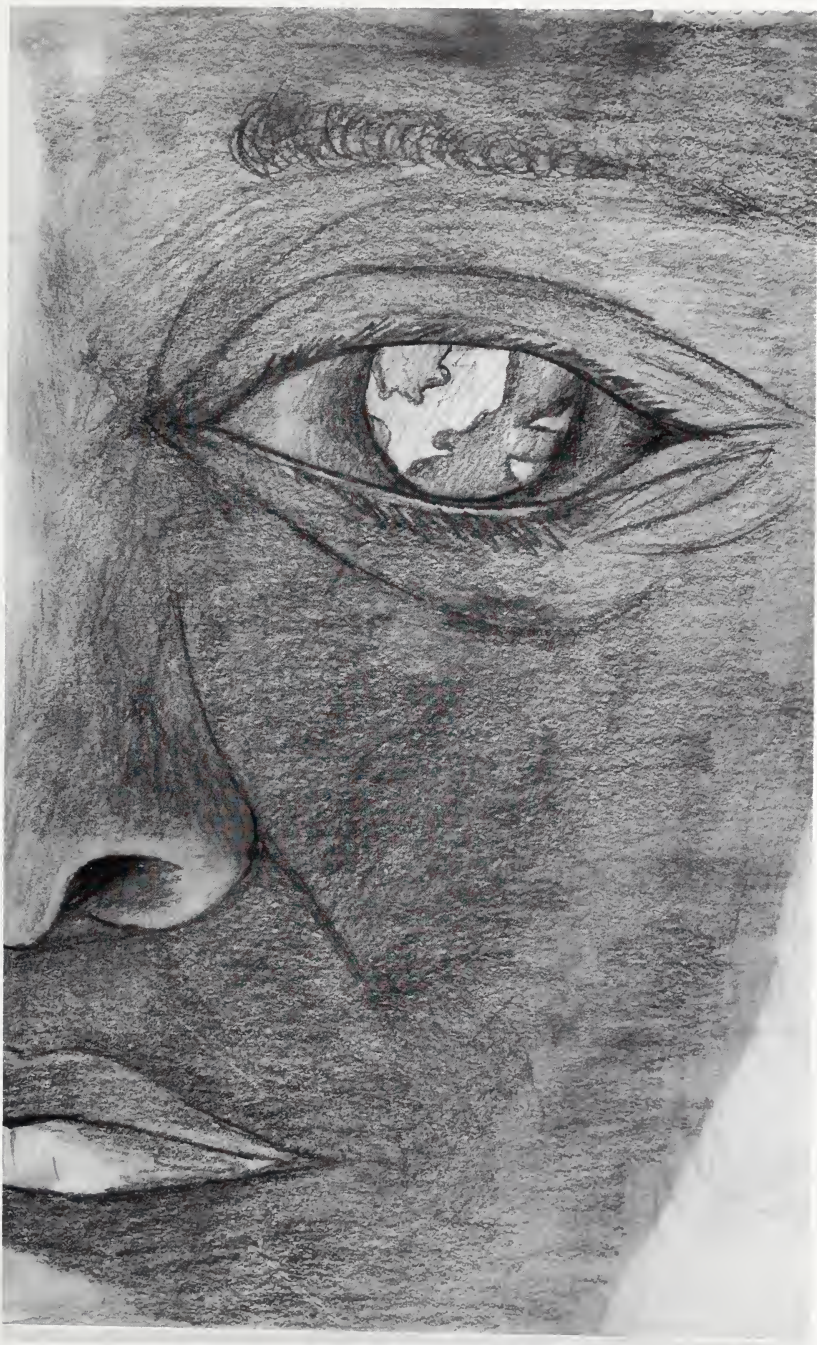
"Oh, I love you so much," she whispered in his ear.

"I love you , too," he said at last. Sarah leaned back, speechless. Did he actually say that? Or was it her imagination? Either way, it did not matter, because she had heard him. Ronald took one last, long look at his Sarah. Then, he went.

She kissed her hand and put it to his lips, and said, "Until we meet again."



Illustrator: Garrett May



Illustrator: Garrett May

A Long Ride Home

MEGAN RUSSELL

BROOKHAVEN, MISSISSIPPI

Naomi sat nervously on the bench waiting for her train. She knew if anyone recognized her now she would never get away. And for Naomi getting away from this one horse town-and her father-was a must. The midnight train to New York should have been there twenty minutes ago-and as the hands on the clock steadily moved, Naomi grew more and more anxious. She also had to me on her hands-time to do what she had grown to hate—think. Her mind wandered back to two days ago on her steamy front yard after that miserable August rain. How could her father expect her to give up her dreams, how could he demand her to marry Bill and be the house wife of a carpenter the rest of her life? Bill was a good man, but Naomi dreamed of love, and was not ready to settle for someone her dad needed for business.

As the noisy train pulled into the station at forty-five minutes past twelve, Naomi's thoughts came to a sudden halt. She quietly climbed on board and quickly found a seat. She was finally able to breath a small sigh of relief, not all the weight had lifted from her shoulders yet, but Naomi knew getting on the train was the first step. She had three and half hours before the train made its next stop, and all ten of the train's passengers were fast asleep. Once again, Naomi had time to think, Her mind wandered back to that hot Delta night. Her dad had seemed understanding all her life, it was hard even for her to believe that Bill could talk him into this. There was just something about that man that bothered her—perhaps it was the way he spoke to her, like she was beneath him; or maybe the way he touched her, like he could take her at any moment; but most of all it was the manipulation he went about to make her his wife. He never even tried to win her heart the way a real man would have.

The train began rolling to stop, tearing Naomi out of her memories. She slid to the inside seat, trying to become invisible; fearing that someone would recognize her. Five minutes, and thirty passengers later that train pulled out of the station. A man, probably in his early thirties, filled the seat next to Naomi. For

some reason he immediately caught her attention and she found herself fighting to stare at him. With chestnut skin, auburn hair, and dark thoughtful brown eyes she wondered what could be going on in that mind of his to put that look of despair on his face. It was still dark outside, and all the new passengers were getting situated and slowly drifting to join the others in sleep. But not the curious stranger next to her, he was sitting there seeming to be as deep in thought as she had been just moments before.

Naomi spent the next hour drifting in and out of a fitful sleep, and trying to figure out the stranger next to her. As the sun began rising, Naomi's stranger finally introduced himself. His name was Harrison White, and as they spoke Naomi was filled with an odd sense of relief, although she didn't really know why. She felt as if she had known Harrison all her life, and it seemed he felt the same way. She had the desire to learn about this stranger, and what exactly had been troubling him earlier. "I've been watching you since you boarded, what is it that's left those worry lines in your brow?" Naomi asked.

So Harrison told her, he told he had ran away from his alcoholic mother and abusive father when he was just fifteen years old, and spending three hard years on the streets before he found work with a woodsman. And he told her he he grew closer and close to his boss and his wife-he eventually became the son the two could never have. And when Harrison's boss died, shortly after his wife, the now family business was left in his hands. For the past three years he had been running the shop with no problem, but now their main supplier had suddenly dropped out of the business and off the face of the earth so it seemed to Harrison. So, Naomi listened and learned of his problems; with no one to cut and sell him wood, he couldn't continue meeting his customers' needs. As the wheels in her head began turning, Naomi tried to conceal her smile from her new found friend. She wanted the rest of their journey to New York to be a time for Harrison to get to know her, not to learn about her father's business.

The train's wheels rolled steadily as Naomi and Harrison chatted. By the time the train arrived in New York, the two knew most everything about each other, except what they were both going to do in the city. They found a small café close to the train

station and ordered a light supper. Naomi knew it was time to propose her idea to Harrison-and she hoped and prayed he would like her idea. As the steamy soup was brought to the table, Naomi began telling Harrison of her father's struggling lumber business and why she had to get out of the Delta.

As her story unfolded, Harrison couldn't hide his excitement. Naomi, and her father were the answer to his prayers. The only thing left for the two of them to do was to let her father in on the plan. Naomi found a phone on the corner, and rung her father. She told him of Harrison, and her plan to save both of their businesses. As she finished, she held her breath waiting her father's response. When he nervously said that sounded like a good idea, Naomi was overcome with joy. The next morning she and Harrison boarded another train, only this time it was heading back to the Delta.

The long train ride gave the two of them another chance to learn each other. And as the train pulled into the station Naomi had started at just days before, they both knew they met for more reasons than business. The next week was a time for her father to get to know Harrison, and on the day the two signed a business contract Naomi and Harrison announced their engagement. The two of them excitedly told everyone in the small town, and for some reason Bill was no longer anywhere to be found. Not only did her dad find a life-long business partner, but Naomi found a life-long companion in Harrison, her husband and the love of her life.



Illustrator: Colt Covington

It's Not Always Gonna Be Sunny and 75 Degrees

GABRIEL MORLEY

TYLERTOWN, MISSISSIPPI

I just found out Deslatte died. He fell off a wireless tower near Austin, Texas, on a clear, sunny day. He was 27 years old. He was 6 foot 3. He weighed about 220 pounds and his body always looked strong. He had long, powerful arms. He had a hairy chest. He had dark eyes and dark hair and the softest voice I've ever heard. He told me once that he wanted to be a college professor.

I read in the newspaper that Deslatte's dad was on the same work crew as his son and watched from the ground as Deslatte fell 200 feet. I think of him standing there, looking up into the sun and shielding his eyes from the reflection on the metal tower watching Deslatte as he was lowered on a rope—watching to make sure nothing happened. Then that shocking, desperate, awful feeling in his throat and stomach like someone suddenly crammed a vacuum hose in his mouth to suck the life out of him. Thinking if he could only catch him. Or get to him in time. Or that some other unnamed miracle would swoop in and cushion his only son from such terrible danger. Holding his breath.

One thousand one...one thousand two...one thousand three...one thousand four...one thousand five...one thousand six...one thousand seven...Exactly that long.

Timothy P. Deslatte saved my life one night in the north Florida woods in October 1994. Our unit had been in the woods for 10 days with one MRE per day and two or three or four hours sleep each night—running for miles in that soft, white, Gulf sand in our black polished boots with 80-pound packs slung on our backs—land navigating in blackout conditions, terrified of vines or ghosts or whatever it is that reaches out to grab you on such nameless nights—fording the same swollen swamp where four Army ranger students would die of exposure only three months later—digging holes to lay in at night while we guarded the camp perimeter in that salty-smelling emptiness—all the while crying

to ourselves in the anonymity and eventual sanctity of that palmetto flurried blackness. Oh, mama.

Our squad had accomplished its mission and arrived at the rally point ahead of schedule. We dropped our packs slightly into the woods, off the road for cover. Four of us. I was 20 years old. Deslatte was 19. I'm pretty sure Justin Mallon was there. He was 21, which meant he was in charge. His dad was a general or colonel or something. His brother was some kind of military hero too, or wanted to be. Mallon hated the military. He hated the big wigs. But there was nothing else for him. He had washed out of para-rescue school and volunteered to join up with us. We were supposed to call in air strikes on enemy targets. Mallon went from learning how to save lives to studying how to steal them away. He was loud and gruff and belligerent, but I always wanted him around. I didn't care if he was in charge or not. I knew he would protect me.

Mallon was sleeping, sitting up with his whole body scrunched under his poncho and his hood pulled over his head. I can't remember who else was there. Maybe Stinky. Maybe Aaron. My mind escapes me now, just as it did then.

I was delirious and starved and shivering cold. My BDUs were soaking wet and weighed about 800 pounds. I had been jogging in little circles in a clearing, doing the combat shuffle through the sand and singing some nonsense to myself trying to warm up and stay awake. We were waiting at our rendezvous point. The rest of our unit was to meet us there in several hours. Our radios were useless in the rain. Besides, what would we have said. "We're cold. We're tired. Can you come get us?"

Finally, exhausted and weary, I lay down in a puddle and curled up as best I could in wet clothes, on wet sand, in freezing rain, with soggy, wrinkled feet in 20 pound boots. My teeth were chattering non-stop. My whole body was jerking with cold. Then, at some point, my body relaxed and I closed my eyes. I don't know how long I slept, but when I opened my eyes Deslatte was calling my name. He came lumbering out of the pitch dark pines like some ghastly figure slumped against the shadows and the freezing rain. He like a dream to me. Lifting me and guiding me back into the woods. He could have been the Angel of Death, but for his voice.

"I didn't hear you singing anymore," he said. "I came to check on you. You can't go to sleep, man." He put his arm around me. "We've got to get you warmed up. You're getting hypothermia."

Deslatte wrapped me in his space-age, camouflauge blanket, one of those that weighs nothing but keeps you warm somehow. He told Mallon to get up, and Mallon told him to shut the hell up. He kicked Mallon's boot and told him again to get up. Mallon simply shifted his feet so that Deslatte couldn't kick them anymore.

"Get up and go get some wood," Deslatte said. "We've got to make a fire and get him warmed up."

"You're not allowed to start a fire," Mallon said. "It's a friggin park or nature preserve or something. And everything's wet. So shut the hell up. He should have brought his poncho."

I should have brought my poncho. I just didn't pack it. It was my own fault. It was more weight to lug around and I didn't think I'd need it. Deslatte and the other guy who I can't remember went into the woods and scrounged up armloads of sticks while I sat with my knees pulled up to my chest underneath the blanket trying to stay warm. Mallon never budged.

They dumped the sticks in a pile and sprinkled leaves on top. It was all sopping wet and the rain was still pouring down. Deslatte tried to make a little tipi out of the sticks and shelter some pine cones underneath. But it was useless. They had a little lipstick capsule of waterproof matches but everything was too wet. The matches lit, but nothing else did. Deslatte wouldn't look at me.

"Get up, Mallon, and take off your poncho," Deslatte said.

"Shut up."

"Just give me your poncho, Mallon."

"Use your own damn poncho."

"I didn't pack my poncho."

I will never forget Deslatte for saying that. I will never forget the way he said it as if he was casting his lot with me then and there no matter what it might hold. It made me feel less alone.

Deslatte and I had only spoken a few times. He heard that I

had lived in Slidell. He had lived there too, briefly. I think he told me he lived there with his mother. If I recall, his father was retired from the military. Deslatte had grown up all over Europe and gone to Defense Department schools. I'm sure he spoke two languages. He had backpacked around Europe. He was certainly different. In a way, all of us were different then. But he was quiet and friendly and I know he must have seen how afraid I was because he always tried to encourage me. He liked baseball.

I don't recall ever asking him if he had been to college. Or about his family. He told me all about Germany. He told me he bought a Mercedes for \$5 from a guy who was being shipped back to the U.S. A diesel, I think. I told him I wanted to be an English professor. He said he wanted to be a college professor too. I wish I knew what subject. He liked history, I remember that. I don't know why after 10 years, but I remember it. We were sitting side-by-side on a cheap, orange couch outside the breakroom of a military classroom eating fruit pies. Just talking about nothing. Just glad to be young and alive. I remember all that.

They only had a few matches left. My teeth were chattering. At some point, Mallon got up, took off his poncho and barked at me to get up and hold part of it. He held an edge and the other guy held what was left. We made a canopy over the sticks to block the rain. Deslatte dug through his rucksack for anything dry that might catch on fire. The little tidbits of paper he found merely burned themselves out. The sticks were too wet. We were losing matches and now Mallon and Deslatte were shivering too.

Deslatte went to his pack again and this time pulled out a smoke canister. He looked at Mallon. Perhaps for some recognition. Perhaps for some permission. Perhaps a denial. Who could say? But shivering in that wet night, being 21 years old, being responsible for the lives of men, being Mallon, he told Deslatte to fire it up.

It's hard to concentrate the heat from a smoke canister because the force of the smoke being emitted causes the canister to ricochet around on the ground. Sparks shoot out like fireworks. It's combustion. Normally, you're in an open area and the canister is able to squirrel around all over the place creating a colored cloud of smoke to signal aircraft. But Deslatte wanted to

focus the heat on our sticks to dry them out. So he had to open the canister and then try to get it under the tipi of sticks while we held the poncho over the whole thing. Then we had to hope the canister wouldn't squirt out from underneath the poncho or fizzle in the sand without drying anything. We had to hope we didn't get smoked out. We had to hope the poncho didn't catch on fire.

Deslatte set it off. Then he tossed it under the poncho into the pile of sticks. It whirled around as long as we could see it before orange smoke filled the camp like thick fog. It made a high-pitched squeal and we could see little sparks shooting out of the canister. When the canister was empty, Deslatte held a match to a pine cone and it lit. Then he balanced another pine cone against the one on fire. The little fire erupted and Deslatte went to get more pine limbs. He tended the fire while we held off the rain. It was warm and full and got so hot we had to keep turning around from front to back so we wouldn't get burned. It smelled so good.

Several hours later, one of our instructors showed up and chewed us out for lighting a fire. Deslatte told him he did it because we were cold and wet, and above all we were supposed to look out for each other. The instructor told us to get our gear and get in the Hummer. As we were leaving, he kicked over the sticks and stamped out the fire. Then Deslatte went back to help him cover up the whole thing. The instructor asked him how he started a fire in the rain with wet wood. Deslatte told him what we did. He just shook his head.

He drove us to an airfield where we were supposed to meet the rest of the unit and dropped us off. Staff Sergeant Finn showed up about 20 minutes later with the rest of the guys. We all marched together back to camp, packed up our tents and loaded it all into the back of a deuce and went home. We rode home on top of our A-bags, in the rain. The cold bit our faces if we looked up to see where we were. I was freezing again. I tried to snuggle under our gear, but it was wet too. I don't know where Deslatte was or what he was doing. Many times since then I have longed to be back in front of that fire smelling it and feeling it wrap me up.

I don't have any other memories of Deslatte. I don't know

where he was stationed after that. Sometimes I think he went to Ft. Drum. Sometimes I think he went to Ft. Hood with Smitty. I want to remember that he came to Ft. Polk once, but I can't place him there.

In July 2002, I did a search for Deslatte on the Internet. I was at work. It was before noon. I wondered what happened to him. I found out that two months prior, he had fallen off a wireless tower in Texas. I found out Deslatte married a girl named Samantha. He had two young children and Samantha was eight months pregnant with their third child. She was living in New Braunfels, Texas, 600 miles from where they buried Deslatte in Wadesboro Catholic Church Cemetery in Ponchatoula, Louisiana. I found out his dad was on the same tower work crew.

I had not seen Deslatte or spoken to him in eight years. But for some reason, I searched for him on the Internet that day. Maybe I heard him stop singing and just wanted to check on him. But I was too late.

We were supposed to look out for each other.

I immediately did a search for Mallon. Nothing. But I'm still looking. He might need a poncho.

I think about Deslatte's little children; the few things I have that I could offer them; what little I know about their father as a young man; what only I may know that might make all the difference in their own lives.

When my own children are older and ask me who my hero is, I will tell them that one night in the north Florida woods Timothy Paul Deslatte saved my life.



Illustrator: Larry Foster

Precious

CRAIG DONALD CASE

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

It's funny, sometimes, to see what different people hold dear. One person could care so deeply about a certain something, deeply enough to reach out and love—while another person, maybe even the world itself, could casually spit on the same thing.

This is a story partly about human nature and partly about inexplicable fate; it is also completely true. I'll say that it happened in a little rural town called Creekharbor, even though it didn't—because the setting's unimportant. I'll say that it involved a little awkward boy named Scott, even though that wasn't his name—because it doesn't matter who he was. All that matters is that he cared about something pure.

Once upon a time, a baby named Scott came into this world during a gentle but constant snowfall. Unblemished sparkles of white floated down from the peaceful sky as his parents drove him to their home on Fortune Street, where two much older children awaited him. Scott grew up healthily in a good home, for the most part. His father was rarely home because of his job. His mother loved him very much, but was sick a lot of the time and didn't know what to do when Scott's brother would tell him to go away or when his sister would threaten to kill him.

Scott excelled in school without really trying—in academics, at least. The little boy desperately wanted to be liked and to have friends, going so far as to even give presents to random children in an attempt to befriend them. Unfortunately, Scott's enthusiasm and naivety was so great that he mostly caused other kids to regard him with disdain and to take advantage of him. He made one good friend, though: an exuberant, outgoing boy named Owen.

Scott and Owen were constant friends throughout the years, though Owen occasionally distanced himself from Scott due to his other friends not liking him. Scott was just a pudgy boy who stuttered a lot, but he had a big heart. It wounded him when

other children looked down on him, but more than anything he felt love for creatures that were fragile and precious.

One winter evening, Scott was hanging out at Owen's house, sitting out on the back porch and talking with his friend about the silly things boys their age speak of. Scott liked Owen's house, because Owen's father lived in another state and his mother, Helen, was almost never home; Scott was too young to think of this as anything but an opportunity to be as loud or as quiet as they wished. It just so happened that night they were being quiet, and a starving calico cat sauntered up out of the black night, looking for food.

Scott loved cats, despite the fact they almost always ran away from him as quickly as possible. He immediately took pity on the shriveled feline and, after asking Owen's permission, silently used some baloney from the refrigerator to make a trail leading into the house. Scott and Owen hid themselves, and after a while the cat's hunger overcame her suspicion. Once she was in the middle of the living room, Scott shut the door, scaring the poor old cat right out of her mind.

After about an hour of hiding behind the couch, the cat gradually realized the gentle boys who gave her food and led her into the warm place meant no harm. She slowly came out of her hiding place and slinked about, exploring the house, until finally she became comfortable and let Scott pet her. The cat purred contentedly, and her and Scott both began to think life wasn't so bad after all.

Scott knew his mother wouldn't let him have any pets, but Owen agreed to take care of her. So she stayed there, with Scott coming to visit often, and was treated well; she was fed often and even allowed to come in and out of the house as she wished, because Owen had a sliding door he kept slightly ajar for her.

Scott spent the night at Owen's house several months later, spread out haphazardly on the couch in the living room as usual. The following morning, the cat, now quite plump, awakened him by licking his hand. Groggily, Scott smiled and ran his palm softly over her fuzzy head. She meowed happily in response, then ran out the gap in the sliding door; Scott closed his eyes again. Another meow disturbed him once more. The cat had returned, standing at the door, looking directly at him. Figuring

she wanted to be fed, Scott rose amiably and followed her outside.

The cat lay down in a little space she had chosen under the frame of the trailer's wooden steps. As unlikely and bizarre as it may sound, she proceeded to give birth right there in front of the astonished boy. Turning away, Scott recalled distantly that his mother once told him animals didn't take kindly to humans being around their newborns. He'd even been told that animals would disown offspring which had the scent of humans on them. Yet here was this stray who had practically asked him to be present at the birth of her children.

As I said before, Scott had a big heart. I don't know how other people would interpret this, but Scott decided the cat wished for him to look after her babies. He, a social outcast with very few friends, was profoundly touched that any creature would trust him in such a way. He felt honored, as though he'd been entrusted with a sacred duty. He resolved to do all in his power to fulfill this duty—it was a vow which would cause him much sadness.

Scott stood watch the rest of the day from a small distance away. When Owen awoke, Scott told him in a reverent tone of what had taken place; Owen thought it was the strangest thing he'd ever heard of. Several minutes passed in silence as the boys watched the joyously beaming mother dote over her newly born kittens as they mewed and stretched about in blindness. Seeing some dogs drawing near, Scott took up a stick and ran them off diligently; Owen thought him to be completely insane.

Momma—as the cat came to be called—raised her young ones with constant attention and love. The kittens could always be seen in Owen's back yard, playing and sneaking and laying about. Most of them were very friendly, with little fear of the humans who had been so good to them. Scott visited even more often than before, making sure they were all still being fed and cared for—his mother allowed him to take one for himself, an orange and white bob-tailed kitten who was the most easy going thing God had ever made.

Owen and his mother Helen had taken a liking to two kittens in particular. Both of them were white little things who were very cute and fluffy compared to their siblings. Helen

named them Crystal and Coke, and let them stay inside while the lesser kittens had to stay outside with Momma. Scott felt sorry for them, but never in his worst nightmares did he imagine what would happen next.

Helen eventually began to resent all the money she was losing due to cat food. She needed that money to support the habits of her nightlife and couldn't find anyone to take the rest of them. I will never know how she brought herself to it, but she paid a man down the road to get rid of them. So on a cool afternoon while Owen was at Scott's house, she stepped outside with the food bowl in her hand. The cats ran up, meowing adoringly to the woman who had so often nourished them. She laid the food down and took the protesting Crystal and Coke into the house with her as the others crowded around the bowl, never suspecting anything. Helen picked up the phone and called her neighbor from down the road.

He drove up in his truck and parked a good ways away from the cats. He stepped out, taking his double-barrel shotgun in his hand. I often wonder what emotions the man felt as he pulled the trigger. Was his sadness overcome by his need for money? I also wonder what exactly is the difference between that man, Helen, and people like Scott. They all grew up in the same small town, and they all believed in the same compassionate God. Most of all, I wish I knew why they had to die.

Owen told Scott about the killing a week later. The poor boy, utterly devastated, withdrew to his room for a long time; those were some of the saddest days of his life. He skipped school and scarcely ate at all for a week, mourning the loss of precious friends and his failure to protect them. Time eventually healed Scott to an extent, and he went on with his life; he even started visiting Owen's house again after a month. He took consolation in the fact that three of Momma's children remained alive and happy, blissfully unaware of mankind's cruelty.

Life went on. During a harsh winter a few years later, Helen changed the antifreeze in her car and was too tired from her usual activities to do anything more than leave the chemicals on the ground. Coke, always curious, happened upon the antifreeze and tasted of it liberally. Not long thereafter, Coke became lethargic and vomited whenever he tried to eat anything. Since he was

making a mess in the house, Helen and Owen sent him outside and refused to let him in whenever he weakly scratched at the door.

A few nights later, Scott came over and saw Coke outside, alone, in the biting winter chill—just like Momma. Disgusted, Scott asked Owen for the reason he'd left his pet outside in the cold. Owen looked away, and he responded that Coke was sick and throwing up in the house. Feeling sick himself, Scott stared at his friend with disappointment and asked why the cat had not been taken to a veterinarian. Owen, who had been talking about a new video game he bought last week, said they didn't have the money for it. Scott shook his head and went home. He couldn't sleep at all that night.

The next morning, Scott arrived at Owen's, picked the weak cat up, put him in a pet carrier in his car, and drove him to the local veterinarian's clinic. He paid for Coke's treatment himself. He sat in the waiting room, praying. When the door opened again, the veterinarian brought out a much healthier looking Coke, and said he'd be just fine.

Scott took Coke home with him and gave him the love and attention he received when he was still a cute kitten. He kept Coke in his room with him that night, though his mother insisted he be kept in a pet carrier with a garbage bag surrounding it to avoid the carpet being ruined. Before he went to bed, Scott put Coke in his lap and petted him for a long time, glad he was able to help. Coke purred softly, comforted at last.

The next morning, Scott awoke to see Coke having a violent seizure in his cage. Confused and concerned, he flew out of bed and went to the cage and saw the cat shaking uncontrollably, making pathetic sounds. Knowing not what else to do, Scott opened the cage, and Coke flopped out onto the garbage bag, staring up at Scott with crazed blue eyes. In the tortured animal's death wails, Scott could empathically hear the cries for help—cries that Scott could do nothing for. And so Coke died, writhing on that garbage bag. Never has any human being cried more bitterly over a cat than Scott did that day.

Momma's two other children lived peacefully, until they both disappeared into the wilderness years later. Scott went on to find a woman who could appreciate a weird but caring guy and

has never wanted for anything since—except he wishes he could have done more for the innocent creatures he swore to protect. The moral of this very true, very real series of events lies not, I think, in Scott's failure—but rather in the fact that despite the world's innate darkness, he tried to bring light. Everything and everyone dies, but because of one man's love, a few insignificant beings knew some happiness where without him, they would've known only misery. Is that not significant in itself? Is that not worth living for? Though it is often contrary to human nature, and though it is often defying fate, people should always reach out to that which is precious. One shining moment of goodness and joy, even amidst an ocean of pain, can make life worth living.



Illustrator: Amber Sbravati

I Can Spot One

NICK STEIN

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Mrs. Harvey watched as her new homeroom students came through the doorway of the room that would be their weekday destination for the next nine months. She examined each face as they entered and greeted them with a warm smile. They seemed to be a good bunch of frustrating, perfectly ordinary, seventeen-year-olds. As the bell rang, she waited a few moments longer for the stragglers that would undoubtedly be late for the first day of class. She looked down at her attendance book to double check the numbers, then glanced up again as one last young man sauntered into the classroom. Mrs. Harvey stared at him apprehensively and he stared back with cold, uncaring eyes. A familiar feeling came over Mrs. Harvey as the cold grip of fear held her speechless.

Nathan had straight, blond hair that came down to his shoulders and eyes of such a dark blue that they appeared entirely black at first glance. He was dressed much like the others in the room, wearing beige khakis and an untucked T-shirt. Most teachers wouldn't have thought of him as any different from the rest of the kids, but Mrs. Harvey knew he was. His eyes held hers for only a second before he broke the connection and headed towards the only empty desk, nodding and half smiling to a few classmates on his way. It was only a second, but it was long enough. Mrs. Harvey shuddered and closed her eyes. It was happening again.

"I can always tell," she thought, "I can spot one in an instant, and I better stop him now before he can do anything." Nathan would be the fifth student she had noticed in this way. Regretfully, at least to Mrs. Harvey, he would only be the third upon which she had taken action. Early in her teaching career, there had been two others. She had done nothing about these students, and she still held herself personally responsible for the tragic heartbreak that they had caused. She had known but done nothing. She always knew. Mrs. Harvey wasn't sure how she

knew what she did. She didn't see herself as having any special powers, and she hadn't ever dreamed things before they happened. She was never any good at predicting the sex of her friends', and her love life was proof enough that she was no psychic. Yet, for some reason unknown to her, Mrs. Harvey could always spot a future killer. Their eyes always gave them away. There was a certain cold, dead look in their eyes that was obvious, and Nathan had that look.

The first time she had spotted future killer, she had only been teaching for three years. She kidded herself about having an overactive imagination and had treated Brian with the same respect and kindness that she showed all her students. Only a year later, Brian had strangled his girlfriend to death after a drunken argument at a party. The memory of the second one, Teddy, still haunted Mrs. Harvey's dreams and woke her up in a cold sweat at least once a week. Teddy had been in her class only four years after Brian, and she had once again known immediately but done nothing. Teddy took longer to start killing but made up for lost time. Before finally being captured and convicted at the age of thirty-six, he had brutally stabbed and mutilated fourteen people.

Many years passed before Mrs. Harvey saw the look in any of her students' eyes, but when she did, she vowed to take action herself before more were hurt. The action she took was in the form of an "accident" alone a nearby river. Eric was walking home, late as always, when he must have fallen in the water and drowned. Without motive, there was never a hint of suspicion surrounding Mrs. Harvey. She felt no guilt for what she saw as simply a premature exercising of the death penalty. Surely such a penalty was better to give before innocent lives were lost, rather than after. She did all she could to comfort and console Eric's grieving parents, sincerely sympathizing with them in their mourning. However, she also knew that any grief they felt was minute compared to the emotional agony that would have come to fruition had Eric lived.

Five years later, a young man by the name of David walked through the doorway of Mrs. Harvey's room. To a normal set of eyes, David was just a sloppy, smart mouthed kid who only needed a little more maturity to develop into a responsible adult.

Mrs. Harvey, however, knew otherwise. David's accident took place on his motorcycle. The crash was brutal, and the funeral had to be a closed casket ceremony, but this was all a necessary evil in the mind of an aging high school teacher. These incidents seemed like they had happened a lifetime ago, and Mrs. Harvey was hoping that her upcoming retirement would win the race against another killer, but Nathan still sat in his desk.

She watched him closely but carefully over the next few days. She wanted to make absolutely certain that there was no mistake, but she knew deep inside that she could never make such an error. Nevertheless, her observation continued. Although irritatingly cocky, Nathan was not an outright troublemaker by any means. He didn't seem to have any very close friends, but he got along well with everyone and was fairly popular. Mrs. Harvey paid no attention to these signs, though. She only watched his eyes, and his eyes never changed. Finally, she decided that something had to be done soon.

At her advance age, things were not going to be as easy as they had been in the past. First, she would need to review Nathan's schedule of classes and extracurricular activities. His guidance counselor, Mr. Warner, would have all of this information. Then, she could devise a plan to eliminate Nathan without suspicion. Anxiety and fear flooded Mrs. Harvey's mind, but she knew that she must continue with her righteous duty.

Mrs. Harvey entered Mr. Warner's office confidently. Because she had a reputation for taking personal interest in her students, she knew there would be nothing unusual in her request for a bit of information. To hide her intentions, she would also ask about a few other students and make long, meaningless conversation with the counselor. There would be no suspicion.

Mr. Warner was a middle-aged man with a warm, pleasant face who was also new this year. Mrs. Harvey had spoken with him on several occasions and eaten lunch with him a couple of times. He seemed nice, caring, and genuinely interested in the students. She explained what she was after. He listened to her intently and with much interest. Mr. Warner informed her that he would have the information ready later that afternoon and would drop it by her classroom when school let out. "It's so nice when people really care about the students," thought Mrs.

Harvey as she walked out the counselor's office.

The clock in Mrs. Harvey's classroom read 3:23 when Mr. Warner knocked on the door. Mrs. Harvey hastily tidied up the papers that covered her desk before asking him to come in. He entered quickly and closed the door behind him. As he approached her desk, Mrs. Harvey stood up with her arms crossed, impatient to get this first stepout of the way. Mr. Warner studied her carefully for a few moments, then raised his arms. "I can always tell," Mr. Warner thought to himself as his hand closed around Ms. Harvey's neck, I can spot one in an instant."



Illustrator: David Russell

Returning Like a Dog

DAYNE SHERMAN, FEATURE AUTHOR

PONCHATOULA, LOUISIANA

Talbert Mullins hobbled over to the creosote dock and looked into the water. The water was black as wet tar, stagnant, full of loam soil, and burdened with the smell of rotten leaves. Nothing moved but his reflection. Talbert could see himself in the water, a crippled old man with white hair spilling out of his red baseball cap, the hickory walking cane at his side like a short spear.

The Friday morning appointment with the cardiologist had not gone well. The blockages in his carotid arteries were tight as a clenched fist, and his blood pressure was through the ceiling despite the pills. Talbert was a time bomb. And he knew it. He thought about the story he had heard when he got back to the campground, how a burly man with a heavy New Orleans accent stood on the dock and hit his own wife with an open hand. Just thinking about it made his chest sting with pain.

From what he had gathered, the couple got into a nasty argument while fishing the Tangilena River. The husband, apparently drinking beer all morning, frightened his wife by driving the boat full throttle, reckless enough to straighten out a bend in the river. The boat got stuck in the mud, wedged between jagged cypress knees. The woman and her boy had gumbo mud matted up to their thighs, caused from dislodging the bow from the snaky bank. The man was clean, or so the impotent onlookers at the campground relayed to Talbert.

At the launch, the man had cursed her and the Lord. She was not backing down at first. But when the blow to the face shook her courage, she fled. He ran after her to the restroom behind the bait shop. She hid, locked behind a hollow door, safe until he kicked it to splinters at the jams. He then dragged her back out to the launch by the hair of the head, out to his green Dodge pickup, out where her skinny eight-year-old son sat huddled in the cab. Then he paid Talbert's helper for the door.

Standing on the dock, the old man moved the busted door

through his mind again. He felt the scratchy smoothness of the hundred-dollar bill in his pocket. *This money can't wipe away what he done*, Talbert thought. *A blood offense warrants blood.*

Days went by, another Friday and Saturday, and the man did not reappear, nor did his family. There had been no sight of the truck, trailer, and boat for two weeks. Talbert could see the shape of the man's face, his shadowy features with chin hair, the thick brown goatee.

The family fished the river a few times before, never catching much. They never said much either. But the next morning, Sunday, the man and his wife and stepson pulled into the gravel lane that led to the boat launch. A stream of dust trailed the rig in ghost-like rooster tails. Talbert knew the rig, and he could not help but recall his father saying a dog always returns to his vomit.

The pickup made the circle, backing a sleek bass boat with its black 150 horsepower Mercury outboard into the concrete slip, the downgrade ten feet to the February-cold water. Scuffed and marred places were visible on the fiberglass hull where the boat had scraped cypress knees.

Talbert was a little worried himself, sixty-five years old, weak enough in the knees to lean more and more of his weight on the walking cane with each passing day. He still had his arms and chest, the upper part of his torso meaty, an ample fit for his tall man's height, but his legs were atrophying from a car wreck the year before. The cane never left his side. Likewise, he kept a holstered stainless steel magnum clipped to his belt. For almost a decade he'd run the place without unholstering the weapon, but he now questioned how long the peace would last.

He eased up to the Dodge quietly. The sound of gravel crunched under the tires. An electric motor buzz issued from his red golf cart. "Hey podner," Talbert pointed to the duct tape-covered seat next to him, "come take a ride in my buggy with me." He felt a throbbing twinge of pain in his left arm. "I got to show you a little something."

The man cut a glance at his squatty woman who was trying to light a cigarette cupped in her hands, but the wind was blowing too hard to make it easy. He sat on the seat beside Talbert. They motored off. Neither man talked. The passenger was

flushed red in his cheeks, and it became clear by the silence that he realized he was being called down for the foolishness two weeks ago.

The men rode out behind the camping area where eight trailers were set in a row a few yards apart, beat-up camps left year-round by fishermen or winter deer and duck hunters. Mull's Launch and Stay was not a real campground, just something to keep Talbert busy in retirement. He'd put in thirty-one years at a plant on the Mississippi River, and this was the end, a good place to retreat, the only tool lately to keep his mind off his wife. The wreck claimed her; she died beside Talbert in the passenger seat of their car.

Out back, down a grassed-over logging road, just beyond a garden spot where he used to grow vegetables, was his dump. Behind it stood a pile of dirt six feet high and ten feet long, the place where he target practiced his revolver, the mound of earth left over from the garbage hole, soil he would one day hire a dozer to spread across the pit. The hole made him think about his neighbor Mondo Carter's dead coon hunting mule they burned with diesel fuel and car tires a month back, and how the maggots made a pop-sizzling noise when they burst beneath the flame. The skull and sharp ribs and shod feet stuck in his head like a vision of hell, the vision he saw during the eulogy at his wife's funeral service, the hard-shell gospel preacher calling down fire and brimstone. The smell of death was thick in his nose.

Talbert shut down on the brakes and stopped the cart with a skid of bald tires in the grass. He sent an elbow to the man's left temple, jarring his passenger nearly unconscious with the blow. Talbert was around the cart and at the passenger's side. "Hit me you sorry sack of shit. Go on and make me hurt you." Then he cracked the man across the neck with his cane, a stroke that even surprised Talbert himself. He had not moved this fast in years. He grabbed for the gun at his side but stopped at mid-reach.

The man was caught off guard. He looked wild-eyed, shocked. "I got no trouble with you."

"You already got trouble. Taste the trouble I can give you," Talbert screamed, trying to keep his balance about three feet from the cart. "You want to slap somebody at my launch, slap a damn man. Come slap me." He pointed to his barrel chest above his

bird-weak legs.

The wife-beater clutched his temple. "I was drunk out there. I ain't meant nothing of it. I paid for the door. What more do you want?" He turned his head toward the old man.

The excuse and the broken-down look enraged Talbert. He expected a fight. "You ever once come back to my launch and drink or holler at your wife, I'll pistol-whip you. I ever hear of you hitting that wife or boy, hear of you cussing either one of them, I'll hunt you down. You'll have to go to work and tell how a crippled man whipped your ass in a fight."

"I'm sorry, Mister Mullins."

The sound of an apology, coupled with his name, surprised Talbert more than the tears on the man's cheeks.

"Swear it ain't never gonna happen again. By God, swear it."

"I swear," the man said, his head hung and eyes pointed toward his boots.

"Leave her today if you can't do no better," Talbert said. "That boy was watching out there, people say. You'll create a rotten meanness in him the jails can't hold down."

Talbert stopped the cart back at the truck a few minutes later. The man got out and walked over to his bewildered wife and hugged her where she stood with her arms crossed stiff at her chest.

The old man thought how he still had a fire inside, but it was leaving him, and the day would come soon when he could not handle the hard-headed creatures around his place, that he would do good to die in his sleep of a heart attack, and not go down slow in a nursing home bed. He wondered what kind of cruel world he'd wake up to in the morning, and whether these vicious times would last.*

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The Diary of Eve

KAY GARRETT

FLORENCE, MISSISSIPPI

If you can imagine a green morning with the softest whisper of mist covering silver moss, then imagine that as the morning of my birth. For sounds, think of birds, of course. Of melodies, major and minor, sung to the exotic perfection of an African choir with long silences interspersed. And, under it all, the rush of water over stones.

But you can never imagine the fragrance of that day. Don't even try. I can only ask you to remember being a child lying in the honey-fever grass. If you forced open an unborn blade of green, then lay back and dreamed of a thousand roses not yet bloomed—just the dream of them, not the too potent reality, you might get an idea of it. Or perhaps you have a memory of a particular rose. It might be white. Perhaps it came from your mother's rosebush. Perhaps you pretended it was a princess and dressed it in muslin leaves, and when it died you buried it, and that night you remembered the smell all mixed in with honeysuckle and wisteria and the scent of the night. We had hundreds of synonyms for the word smell, just as the Eskimos do for *snow*.

When it rained, the mist would coalesce into brilliant diamond droplets for a few moments. Then the sun would come again and change the earth from silver to gold. The sweet day would ripen into a bouquet of fragrant moments and drop into evening with a whisper of falling petals. For I was born into the morning of this world.

I lived beneath the hill in a veil of trees hanging across a waterfall. Every morning the water fell in a prism of broken light of a thousand shades to the rushing river. And in the evening, the waterfall would turn from all colors to dark azure, from light to darkness flowing into the velvet night. Till at last, in the deep of the night, there were only occasional sparks as the brilliant fish rose, invisible in the darkness but for one shining eye, gliding like a star across the night waterfall before falling again toward the river and the mad rush to the amethyst sea.

And I was the mother of it all. I made it all just as I made myself and what came after. If there was a creator, a god if you will, then I was all bound up in the creator and the creation. All of us—animals, stones, plants, and those of you yet unborn—drove the creation and the creator. And the bright stars whirled around us.

I was beneath the waterfall when first I saw him. He was a creature like me but different. He was tall and strong with merry eyes. He seemed to be looking for something. He seemed to be looking for me.

"Hallooo," I called. And he answered at once. He came tumbling down the bank in a comic manner, losing his footing and sliding like an otter but never letting on that it was an unusual mode of locomotion.

He wasn't at all what I'd imagined, dreaming in the twilight of the day. I'd dreamed up many companions, but he was beyond my wildest dreams. We struck up an acquaintance though, and soon we were fast friends. Always together, we rushed through the meadows chasing the nine-winged butterflies or teasing the cousin monkeys with their funny halting speech and their sad philosophies.

There was no one to scold us. In short, it was Paradise. But something was missing—at least for me. For one thing, we weren't free to roam the Earth as we chose. There was, in fact, a huge wall of thick, twisted vine surrounding us on all sides. I discovered it quite by accident when we were playing a rather silly game of *Spy-Not Spy* with a wild doe. I came back alone and charted the wall's course for quite a long way. I grew certain that it went on forever, encompassing us all in a jade green prison from which there was no escape.

"What can be on the other side?" I asked Adam (for so my companion had christened himself).

"There's nothing on the other side," he replied.

"There can't be *nothing*! How can *nothing* be anywhere?"

"It's much easier for there to be *nothing* on the outside than it is for there to be *something* in here," he told me with a dark look. He had a point there, but I thought of the lights revolving around us each night in the diamond sky and kept silent. During that time, the universe was still flaming. Meteors and comets

whizzed and sang in the night like the warfare of distant wizards.

I found the tree in much the same way as I'd discovered the wall. By accident. Adam and I were chasing each other over hills and meadows, up trees and down, across the broad savannah. We came to a flat place filled with trees, like an orchard. But a space was cleared and, in the center, stood one shimmering tree. We stared at it for a while, and then we went home. After that, we came often to the orchard because fruit was plentiful, and we found new kinds there.

"Let's get some fruit from the tree in the center," I said one day. I was surprised to find Adam quite reluctant.

"I don't think we're supposed to mess around with that tree," he said.

"Why ever not?"

"I'm not sure." He scratched his foot and looked at the branches through narrowed lids. "Tradition," he said at last.

"What's tradition?" I asked. Adam was good at making up high flung words at short notice.

"Tradition is what's always been done or not been done, and no one's gotten killed from doing or not doing it," he said with a firmness that, I thought, belied a certain insecurity.

"The fruit looks delicious though," I said, hoping to appeal to his heart.

"I think it's bitter," Adam said. "Besides, I don't care for that serpent fellow that hangs around up in the branches like some sort of guard." Oh, now we were getting to it.

"Why not?" I said. "He seems nice enough."

"You know why."

I did, and immediately regretted the question. Serpents reminded Adam of some dim dream of dragons that he insisted had its basis in fact. It wasn't that I disagreed or minded the tiresome recitation of this nightmare. I, in fact, had my own pale memories of the shadows of dragons. It's just that I was irked by the continual prefacing of the discussion by Adam's seemingly unfounded claim that he was the elder. It always led to the same argument.

"I think we're the same age," I'd say.

Then maddeningly: "You can't be, you know, because you came from me."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, you had to come from somewhere."

"Granted," I agreed, gritting my teeth.

"So you came from my side one day when I was sleeping. I woke up and there you were!"

"That's ridiculous, Adam."

"Then how do you account for the fact that I have one less rib than you?" he'd always ask in triumph.

"You don't. We have the same!"

Then would begin a laborious counting over and over of our ribs which would always end in the same way because Adam had the type personality that could admit no wrong on even the most trivial issues and in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. You know what I mean.

I began to sink into a mild despair, roaming the deep, green forest alone and traversing the path of the living wall, making a trail against its thick foundation. It was taller than I could reach. Several times, I attempted to climb the slick sides. I slid down before gaining even a few feet, but not before being gored by the heavy briars that fell from the top in lethal tendrils.

Over and over, I began to question the life of games and eating and sleeping in the sun. Hidden somewhere in my brain was a question I couldn't yet formulate. Like a half-remembered lyric, it tickled my mind, but I had no music to which to set the words. One day I came alone to the center of the wood and found the lazy serpent coiled around one of the lower branches of the golden tree. "Would you like some fruit?" he offered. At the same time, he hospitably uncoiled himself.

"I don't think it's yours to offer, is it?" I spoke with care and backed away, still thinking of dragons.

He straightened up, alert at that. "No," he said. "I believe it's yours. I'm looking after it for you."

"Hmmm," I said, stalling. "Then why shouldn't I eat it?" I

was thinking out loud, not asking him in particular.

The serpent made a disgruntled sound. "Whoever said you couldn't?"

"Adam. He said we oughtn't. Shouldn't."

"Two different things."

"What?" I said.

"*Oughtn't* and *shouldn't*."

"I don't see why."

"*Should not* ' implies a higher authority. '*Ought not*' implies a moral imperative," he explained in a tone that belied an infinite patience sorely strained.

"Well, what will happen if I eat it?" I was gazing at the fruit. It had gone a lovely burnt orange, reminding me of a sunset.

"That," said the serpent, "is an excellent question."

"And the answer?" The serpent said nothing, but darted his tongue out as though testing the sweet green breeze that played continually through the branches of the orchard.

"What will happen if I don't eat it?" I asked, trying a new tact.

"Nothing," said the serpent.

I stamped in frustration. I felt that if only I knew the right question, the creature was capable of giving me an important answer. "What kind of fruit is it, anyway?"

"Ah," the serpent sighed. "That might help you decide."

"Well?"

"Well-what?" He really was a most vexing creature.

"Well-what kind of fruit?" I spoke more loudly than before. I was close to tears.

"It's the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," he said.

I thought about this for a moment. I might be on to something here. "Does that mean the fruit gives one knowledge that is both good and evil or that one gains the knowledge to tell the difference between good and evil?" I asked.

"That's another very good question," he remarked.

"And what's the answer?"

"Both."

"Both?"

"Yes."

"The answer is 'both'?"

"That's right."

"Oh." I waited another long while, but the serpent only regarded me with an enigmatic smile.

"Does the wall have a door?" I asked him finally.

"Yes."

"Where is it?" I asked, expecting anything but a straight answer. And wouldn't I have found the door myself after days of investigation?

"Here," said the serpent waving his tail toward the left.

I peered in the direction indicated. I could just see the wall some thirty feet away at its nearest point. It was covered by thick ropes of ivy, and I could make out no door. But it seemed to me that through the deep foliage I could make out a faint light different from the warm golden glow of the garden. It was the cold white-silver light of mystery.

I turned and ran from the orchard. A warm mist had risen about me so that each step I took was concealed—as though I might be stepping off into a great sea.

That night, Adam and I lay hidden in the warm moss of my remembering. We were playing at naming the animals and would whoop with delight as one or the other of us would come up with some ridiculous appellation for an equally ridiculous creature. But I was troubled. I disliked keeping things from Adam. "The serpent says the tree in the middle of the orchard grows the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

"The serpent says."

"Well, it could be true."

"And what if it is?"

"Aren't you curious?"

"No," he said. "I told you. We aren't supposed to eat that

fruit. Why do you want to? And why do you insist on talking to that slimy fellow?" He looked at me, his deep eyes veiled by dark lashes, his brooding forehead gloomy.

"Nothing ever really happens here. I mean, don't you get tired of having everything just laid out for you?" Adam stared, incredulous.

"I guess I'm bored," I said.

"You're bored," Adam said in disgust.

"Yes!" I felt a growing defiance. "And I want to see what's on the other side of the wall!" Adam didn't answer. He rose and moved away through the perfect gathered darkness.

That night I captured a glowing nightbird and carried it with me as I charted the circumference of the wall. Afterward, I sat and thought for a long while, making drawings in the dirt with a sharp stick. From what I could tell, the wall was roughly circular and only a few hundred miles around.

The next morning when I returned to the tree, the serpent was waiting for me. "I knew you'd come," he said, smugly twitching his coppery body until he looked like a length of shimmering sunlight caught in the opalescent dawn.

"You did?"

"Certainly. Isn't conversation with me preferable to talking with that ape?"

"You mean Adam?" No reply. "He's not an ape." The serpent only shrugged, if you can imagine an animal without shoulders shrugging.

"What will happen if I eat the fruit?" I didn't expect an answer. I'd tried to come up with a better question all night. But, again, the serpent surprised me. He pointed downward where, covered by luxurious foliage, a pool lay hidden at the foot of the tree. I watched as the water became clearer and clearer until I could see the pebble-speckled bottom. Then I could see beyond the bottom into somewhere else.

I saw huge silvery birds drift through an alien sky. I saw man fall at war and woman weep. I watched long lines of people pass into smoke at the wave of a dark man's hand. I saw a hill with three leafless trees. I saw an old woman giving bread to

scores of swollen-bellied babies. I saw a man scratching on a white leaf as his images came to life like shadows on the wall behind him. Men and women made images of the world with bits of colored clay. I saw a monstrous cloud rise from the earth till drops of black rain fell from it onto white stone that covered the ground like ice. I saw men walking across the face of the moon.

Finally, I shook my head and there again was the green pool that nourished the roots of the tree with only my own image reflected in the water. I leaped to a branch and confronted the serpent eye to eye, so to speak. "If I eat it, what's the worst thing that will happen?"

"You'll forget who you are," the creature replied with uncharacteristic promptness. "You'll begin to wear masks. You'll separate from everything else. You'll make up a story and forget you're the author. You'll think it's someone else's story."

"And what's the best thing?"

"You'll die. And death will bring art and science into being. Without death, life is a meaningless game. With death, it's still a game, but no longer meaningless."

"Will I have to leave the garden?" I asked.

"That's what you want, isn't it?" said the sly snake.

"But can I ever return?"

"You can try but, once you succeed you'll be back outside the story. Trying to get back will create love. That's the only way back to the garden. Love will bring altruism, worship, and sex—all things that can be used for good or evil, by the way, but I don't think you'll want to do without them."

"So, this good and evil . . ." I began.

Look," he said pointing to the ground where the sun was painting patterns of leaf shadows. "There's no shadow without the light, and you wouldn't know what light was without the shadow."

"But in the end," I insisted, "In the end, I'll come back?"

"It doesn't really matter. You're always here, really, aren't you?" said the serpent with his enigmatic smile.

I pulled the fruit from the tree. It was firm and glowing. I

thought of all the knowledge I longed for. And I thought of forgetting who I was, and I wondered who I would think I was and if that person would be interesting and what the story would be and how it would turn out. I took a bite, and the fruit was richer and sweeter than any I'd had. It was like biting into sunshine. I finished it off and reached for another.

"One more thing," said the serpent. "It makes your head bigger."

"It what?" I called after it, perplexed.

The maddening creature was wriggling through the branches faster than you might think one without feet could move, but he turned and touched the tip of his tail to my forehead. "An unfortunate side effect for you," he said. "Distressing childbirth," he murmured as he slid out of sight.

I soon realized the reason for his haste. Adam was approaching the tree looking dazed. He'd never been so close before, and he appeared awed by the fruit now glimmering like jewels in the full morning sun. Without speaking, I tossed him a piece. As if in a trance, he bit down.

I dropped from the tree and crossed the short space to the wall at a run, Adam following close behind me. Behind the foliage, a wooden gate stood closed, but unfastened. A sudden wind through the garden ruffled the thick fur on the slim, graceful arm with which I pushed open the gate. I stepped out into a silver singing.

The Snake

KAREN WILLIAMS

HAMMOND, LOUISIANA

The preacher drove slowly in the beginnings of sunlight. He liked to visit people when they were still fresh—before they had a chance to tire and complain about the day's troubles. All of his people got up early. Most of them didn't farm for a living anymore, but they still had their land and their farm consciences that warned them of morning's arrival.

He was a little worried about Sarah. He had word that she had had a spell since last Sunday when he brought her to church. Today was Friday. He wondered if she had been coughing much.

It was a pretty day. Spring was just coming in, and Sarah's fields were beginning to green. The preacher drove into Sarah's drive and smelled the last of the plum blossoms.

He saw a flutter of movement in the sparkling glass pane of the front door and slowly got out of his car, smoothing his tan gaberdine pants and patting down a tiny patch above his right knee before gently easing the door shut.

It was Rosa who came out to greet him, quietly rustling in her blue flowered skirt and billowy green blouse that swallowed her thinness. She had come over early to help Sarah clean the house. The white, three-porched house was always clean inside and out, but every spring it was scrubbed and scoured as if it had gathered a year's worth of cobwebs. Sarah was sleeping late this morning, so Rosa had just come in and begun to work. Her house was only a quarter of a mile away, and she had her own key. She was a strong, solemn woman whose job was to see that Sarah's life was in order. Gracious and stern, she offered a smooth hand to the preacher.

It wasn't the cough that jarred her; it was the sudden flash of morning crashing in through her half-open window. She struggled against it violently. She was afraid to wake—afraid to leave the nightmare. She had been dreaming of snakes.

Her body did not look frail as she lay quietly in the green

sheets. She looked better at seventy than she had ever looked in her life. She was a tall, big-boned woman with gray whiskers that she shaved every third day. But she was still womanly—full-breasted—a mother figure to the community. She enjoyed embodying all the characteristics of the perfect homemaker: making the best blue ribbon jelly, the most intricate crosspatch quilts, the crispest pickles. Every year she collected her ribbons from the parish fair. She expected to win, and she always did.

But there was no joy in living—just a perversity toward dying. She could live with destruction, but she could not endure the possibility of remaining intact after death. She was afraid her soul was eternal. Five years ago she had decided that when it was her time to die, she would have the preacher in. If the last person she saw was the preacher, perhaps she could wipe everything away.

Dreamless now, her unconscious wrestled with the snake that goaded her. The snake twisted and writhed against the coming light, knowing that its time was almost past. Against the writhings, Sarah could hear the garbled swallowings of idle conversation, and she sensed the familiar shades of Rosa and the preacher. She could see them plainly—the good and evil together making morning coffee pleasantries, and she hated them both. The preacher was a good man—a kindhearted, loving man who found God at work in every situation. If a needed rain occurred, it was God's will; when Jim Fletcher's twelve-year-old daughter's body was found battered by Moss Creek, the preacher affirmed God's sacred mystery. To Sarah, the preacher was a holy instrument sent to reassure her that all her thoughts and actions were part of the divine plan. She always made sure to get a ride to church with him every Sunday. Now Sarah saw him smiling to the impassive Rosa, and her bowels turned inside her with contempt.

She pictured Rosa sitting silent and complacent with the preacher, an evilness exuding from her body—from her black richness and her superior strengths. She was even able to mask her actions in deeds of kindness and concern. There was a totality of purpose in her skillful, busy hands that convinced Sarah that Rosa's neighborly deeds held a seething malice.

She tried to remember when the snake had first appeared.

She knew that the snake had laughed when she lost her boy child to the crib death. Maybe it was the snake that had bitten him. But before that, she might have found the snake in the boy she met just before she married, the pretty boy with his knowing eyes and winsome smile who had ruined any happiness she might have had with Matt. She had had a long and bitter marriage of thirty-five years, though she had cried bitterly at Matt's passing fifteen years ago. She hated being left alone although she disliked company.

Maybe that was why she always kept up with her relatives. She was her church's official angel of mercy. She always sat with the sick, bringing them her famous casseroles and bible verses. She was generally the first to arrive at the time of tragedy. She did so much good for people that they felt ashamed to cringe when they saw her carefully pleasant face appear at their door.

She and the snake went back a long way. She had recognized him only ten or twelve years ago, but somehow she wasn't surprised by his presence. She could blame all her bodily ills, her acute sensitivities, her exquisite loathings, on the snake.

She still tried to go back and ascertain—now that she knew he was inside her—when he had first appeared. She had felt the snake's convulsive glee at age sixteen when she had lost her favorite brother, and she had felt him writhe with loathsome pleasure when she had blamed her younger brother King for her favorite's death. Tom had been crushed to death when the tree he was felling crashed in the direction opposite to his expectations, while King, who rushed in to help, had only lost a leg. She had resented King's living almost in place of Tom, and she had held him responsible. She had had to look after him ever since the accident. Every week she made a dish of food and sent some poor relative the half-mile through the woods to King's shack to see if he needed anything. He should feel obliged to her; his ingratitude rankled like a worm in the heart of Sarah's charity.

She remembered that she had seen the snake once. She had to reach back for the memory—past years of bitterness, meanness, and dissatisfaction—but when she finally found it, it was fresh and pure, the most vivid occurrence in her life. It had been a rattlesnake. She had found it in the hay barn when she was five years old and unaware of the effect of rattlesnakes on little girls, but

she had stood her ground. She had stared at the snake as unblinkingly as he had stared at her. It was beautifully patterned—a coil of cold loathing that she had never before encountered. She had tucked the memory away, but the impact of the experience crystallized into some secret compartment of her fear.

She had no children, no friends, but she had a fine old wood house and two hundred acres of pasture land and about twenty acres of timber. Three years ago she sold \$80,000 worth of timber, but the money didn't change anything. She didn't buy a car because she didn't know how to drive and didn't have anyone to drive her. There was nowhere to go anyway. There wasn't anything to see in Middletree, the little village three miles away, so she didn't spend her money in town. Her money didn't change her taste. She still puzzled through Shakespeare and raced through Good Housekeeping novelettes. She still sewed bright orange and green print dresses and wore her stockings pulled right up over her knees so that you could see the rolled up tops when she sat down. The only thing the money did was to make her suspect that everyone was trying to get it from her. It caused her worry without end: she kept only forty dollars at home and called the bank once a week to be sure her money was safe.

The only thing she believed in was the snake. She took great stock in church, but she found no comfort in it. She held no illusions about an airy angelic heaven for herself. The snake would not permit it. Yet she had no confidence in the power of evil either. It was too common and too akin to the good. The best she could find was a gray area of noncommittal malice—no true blackening and dooming chaos she could relinquish herself to. There was only Rosa to show evil to Sarah in covert and inexplicable intimations as she cleaned and nursed and ran errands for her.

Confused patterns of Rosa and the preacher continued to beat against some inner mirror of Sarah's mind. They seemed to leap at her through her bedroom walls. The humming and garbling got louder, mounting to a fine buzz in her eardrums as the light continued to vibrate within her head. She was terrified at the thought of waking, but sleep would not keep her.

The snake was angry—squirming in her chest, down to her bowels, and up through her throat. She never doubted the

snake's vision. She had heard the preacher preach about the lying, smiling two-headed snake that enticed Eve into eternal seduction of man, but she blamed it all on Eve and her desire to lower man to her state. She had more control over herself than Eve. She was strong, intelligent, and forceful.

The snake was all that kept her alive now. He had allowed her to see through any careful pretensions. She could categorize people almost instantly. And she could see the ones she knew in perfect abstractions. Rosa was the ultimate evil. Strong, helpful, and silent—she had a power even greater than that of the snake to keep Sarah in line. And the preacher was important too. Weak in himself, he was nevertheless the implement Sarah would use to plead for her soul in front of God. She needed no one to plead for her on account of the Evil One, so she avoided Rosa. He was eager enough for her now. Only the snake kept her whole and independent.

She could hardly stand the snake's last convulsions. The light was lashing inside her too. She knew who would win. Light overcame everything. A silent scream pierced through her body as the snake fled the day. She opened her eyes. An instant was all that was allotted. The buzzing stopped. She glared through the window at a red bird in the oak leaves that were still the color of a light green lizard, and her eyes were so clear that she could see a green lizard on a twenty-foot high branch. Above the tree top, she saw a crow's feather fall through the sky and watched its swirling journey until its impact with the ground. A green tree frog jumped out of the way as the feather hit, and Sarah watched him run to safer blades of grass close to the preacher's car. Then with horror she saw the back of the preacher—a strong, stalwart back walking away from her. Speechless, she turned her gaze to her room and to the darkness of rotting cedar walls. Her mirrored image looked back blankly in the oak dresser and froze as she heard the doorknob turn.

A doorknob turns in a second, but the second is still divisible by an infinite multiplicity of parts; and Sarah could feel the turn of each fragment. Sarah had never known such terror before—its harrowing, throat-drying clasp. She had waited for the moment with anticipation and had relished the thought of it, but she had wanted the preacher on hand to help her transcend it.

Now she would be left only to Rosa's cool, soft hands and knowing eyes, gleaming with an evil awareness, although they offered to Sarah only her own reflection.

The doorknob finished turning, and the silent Rosa entered slowly, fearing that she was too late, going straightway to the bed. Gently, she braced herself to soothe the tortured look of

Sarah's final repose. Chanting softly and musically, she folded the clenched hands into suppliance and closed the dull eyes into darkness. But Sarah's terror remained, fixed in the now quiet face. Rosa wailed, filling the room with the passing horror.



Illustrator: Kristen Butler

A Stereotypical White Male

RANDALL KING

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

essay

The world seems to see white males as having the easiest route to success. I cannot agree. I have experienced speed bumps on my route that almost derail me. At a time when I am barely beginning to understand who I am on the inside, I must fight what some people see on the outside: white, male, and southern.

Racism is probably one of the largest flaws of mankind. Getting labeled a racist is insulting and is a mark nearly impossible to remove. When I served in the army, I had a battle buddy from Cleveland, Ohio, who was black. A battle buddy was supposed to be a best friend and be with me every second, but having him around only made life harder for me. This best friend automatically labeled me as a member of the Ku Klux Klan because I was white and from Mississippi. He believed that I hated anything not white. Once, while being issued our first uniforms, he asked me, "You're from Mississippi, right? Don't they issue you white hoods when you're born?" Nothing I could say or do would prove that he was wrong about me. In his eyes I was the bad guy. I was the one who burnt crosses, tattooed swastikas to my forehead, and worshipped Hitler. My reputation was ruined before I was even born.

Being white and from Mississippi just adds to the antagonism of being a male. Men are well known for their willingness to pursue an intimate physical relationship with women. That is a popular belief that I agree with, but what I do not agree with is the generalization of this belief. Not every man who smiles and says hello to a woman or holds a door open for her is a sleazy animal waiting for his chance to pounce. My best friends in life have all been women, except for one. My best friend right now is a female. To most people, a guy and a girl cannot be close with-

out sleeping together; therefore, my life and reputation is constantly bombarded by problems from this one relationship. For once I would like to extend my friendship to the opposite sex and it not be taken as an offer for an "all-you-can-eat" sexual buffet at the Hampton Inn.

Instead of stitches, the job market has put a bandage on the wound between the ethnic and gender groups. It is now labeled 'Equal Opportunity'. It has not equaled anything out in my life. I was taking a job seminar as I was leaving the army. The lady giving the seminar had more than twenty years experience in hiring for corporations. She was hired by the army to tell us all the secrets and to help us get ahead. After the third day, and after my confidence had risen because of what I had learned, she gave us the truth about how today's companies hire. It is not by the most qualified but by gender, race, and disabilities. Companies have to hire so many different ethnic groups, women, and people with handicaps or disabilities. They actually have quotas on the color they need. Qualifications and experience became a far second compared to my skin and gender. Equal Opportunity is a great concept. Unequal Discrimination is a reality.

The world does not know what equal is. We cannot see it. We have to label and divide everything in life—especially ourselves. If we could stop and try to understand maybe we could ease a lot of tension between people. I understand how it feels to be wrongly judged, and from now on, I will slow down and try to understand a person before labeling them.

The Wasteland of Don Quixote

CRAIG DONALD CASE

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When the name of Don Quixote comes to mind, one most often thinks of a complete madman, lost in his own delusions, jousting with windmills. The image of a dauntless dreamer is also brought to mind. Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is generally regarded as a work satirizing the ridiculous percepts of chivalry, but the eloquent statements about the way life should be lived made by the protagonist can hardly be taken as irrelevant insanity. Who is Don Quixote—a caricature of an outdated ideal or a rebel against a flawed reality? The answer is that Cervantes did not intend for Quixote's tale to ultimately be a satire of lofty ideals, but rather of a world without them.

The opening of *Don Quixote* informs the reader that in the town of la Mancha, there lived an impoverished gentleman named Alonso Quijano. He was an old man, around fifty years of age, whose chief joys in life lay in reading books of chivalry—and the incessant reading thereof caused him to lose his mind. OR perhaps the stark contrast between his empty life and the glorious deeds of knights is what did his sanity in. Either way, the old man clad himself in rusted mail and surrounded himself with impenetrable illusions. For many years, he and his squire Sancho rode about. Involving themselves in all manner of misadventures. At many points in the story, Don Quixote launches into elaborate and flowery discourses on what the proper nature of mankind is, speaking on issues such as honor, valor, knighthood, love, faith, and poetry. An example of this is Quixote's soliloquy on the Golden Age and how the disappearance thereof necessitated the existence of knights-errant: "Happy the age and happy the centuries to which the ancients give the name of golden, and not because gold, which is so esteemed in their own age of ours, was then to be had without toil, but because those who lived in this time did not know the meaning of the words 'thine' and

'mine'...All then was peace, all was concord and friendship...Fraud, deceit, and malice and had not yet come to mingle with truth and plain-speaking...Maidens in all their modesty, as I have said, went where they would and unattended, whereas in this hateful age of ours none is safe... It was for the safety of such as these, as time went on and depravity increased, that the order of knights-errant was instituted, for the protection of damsels, the aid of widows and orphans, and succoring of the needy" (Cervantes 1225-26). The undeniable beauty of his beliefs contrasts the insanity of his actions.

While Don Quixote marches fearlessly through his illusionary existence of grandeur and greatness, the rest of the world proceeds with its usual doings. Whenever Don Quixote enters someone's life by chance, they express amazement and then go about doing whatever they can to abuse Quixote's condition for their own gain or amusement; one instance of this occurs when the chain-gang of prisoners, newly freed by Quixote, violently attack him (Cervantes 1263). Even his squire Sancho thinks mostly of food and the property Don Quixote told him squires inevitably inherit. As the Knight of the Mournful Countenance pursues his quest for nobility and honor, the reader is made to see that the real world he inhabits is very lacking in those qualities.

Even the unnamed narrator of the story is harsh and vicious, attacking Quixote and mocking his madness at every step of the way; he calls Quixote's aforementioned elegant soliloquy on struggling for an ideal world a "futile harangue" that "might very well have been dispensed with" (Cervantes 1226). Almost everyone and everything is antagonistic or indifferent to Don Quixote and to the notion of chivalry, from the narrator, to the inhabitants of the inn where he was knighted (Cervantes 1193), to the farmer involved with his first deed of chivalry (Cervantes 1199), to the various travelers he crosses paths with (Cervantes 1236), and at last to the women of his own household (Cervantes 1325). If the whole course of the story is viewed in this light, it becomes apparent that the reader is meant to feel sympathetic towards Don Quixote—not merely laugh at his antics and overdramatic emotions. This is especially noticeable at the end, where Quixote "regains his sanity" and becomes bed-ridden after being defeated by Sanson Carrasco, a bachelor of la Mancha who pretended to also be a knight-errant in order to beat Quixote as his own game.

There is no humor in the scene in which Alonso condemns chivalry and his entire life up to that point: "My mind is now clear, unencumbered by those misty shadows of ignorance that were cast over it by my bitter and continual reading of those hateful books of chivalry. I see through all the nonsense and fraud contained in them..." (Cervantes 1326). His friends and family, their grief assuaged by the inheritance Alonso is leaving, watch as he slowly dies, ashamed of his life. Sancho begs his hopeless master to resume the quest. There is no satire—simply sadness. Don Quixote ran all over Spain, survived altercations with thugs and lions, and walked just as tall as before; Bon Antonio, a minor character who appears toward the end of the story, remarked that the knight and his squire were "capable of turning melancholy itself into joy and merriments" (Cervantes 1320). Don Quixote was proud, full of purpose, and invulnerable. Alonso Quijano is ashamed, knows nothing but despair, and can do nothing but die.

Was it truly Cervantes' purpose to conceal genuine chivalric passion beneath cynicism and sarcasm? It seems unlikely, but during his youth Cervantes exhibited such valor that any knight of medieval legend would have been proud of him. He enlisted in the Spanish military and fought alongside the allied forces of Christendom against the Turks during the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In that particular battle, he distinguished himself by fighting despite sickness and receiving three gunshot wounds (Cervantes 1177). In his writing, Cervantes displays intimate familiarity with the intricacies of chivalric lore and verse (Cervantes 1178). Could such a man truly have set out to make a laughing stock of chivalry—or did he meant to present it in a whole new light? Subtlety of meaning is far from a new concept in romance, after all. The character Cervantes in Dale Wasserman's musical *The Man of la Mancha* is presented as just such an author, due to the playwright's vision of Cervantes actually being the real-life Don Quixote (Wasserman); Wasserman needed only for the character to recount Cervantes' battlefield experiences with dying men who did not know why they lived to make clear the musical's message of hope through indefatigable idealism (A Tribute to Don Quixote).

If their perspective is adopted, readers familiar with both *Don Quixote* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* may begin to see a

correlation between the two. *The Waste Land* also uses mythic and romantic allusions to present a world suffering from moral and spiritual decay (Eliot 1202). In a sense, the Spain of *Don Quixote* can be seen as a precursor to *The Waste Land*. The magnificent figure of the man of la Mancha parades about, "frightening the world to the core" (Cervantes 1330), but always and ever "turning melancholy itself into joy and merriment." The dissatisfied and bitter people surrounding him laugh and throw stones, but the result of a world without any chivalrous lunatics can be plainly seen, in *The Waste Land*. It is a culturally significant work of social and psychological deterioration—without any answers. A line especially relevant to the death of Quixote can be found in the last verse of Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea/By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown/Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (Eliot 1197). Quixote, previously immune to the social forces of conformity and internal isolation which bind and afflict Prufrock, becomes like the rest of us and dies only when the voice of reality crashes down on him.

Don Quixote's quest to overcome the bleakness of life with illusion and dreams is an undeniably powerful and human one that crosses physical, literary, and spiritual borders. To draw a modern parallel, Christians fight to keep their beliefs relevant against the encroaching advance of science. In the views of some experts, love has been reduced to a chemical reaction and altruism to a herd instinct. If technology is our new savior, then why is depression the foremost and ever-growing psychological malady of contemporary western humanity (Major Depression Facts)? Perhaps the old madman had it right all along when he said, "Too much sanity may be madness" (A Tribute to Don Quixote). Don Quixote's dream may indeed be impossible—but is also immortal.

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Photographer: Jacquelyn Berry

The Weaknesses of a Master

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In each of us there are weaknesses. There are ones that rest on the surface that others are able to see and testify about and then underneath the mask of sanity and perfectness lays struggles and daily battles that must be kept from conquering what we know as ourselves. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the narrator and major character of the novel, Victor Frankenstein, reveals to the reader his apparent weaknesses and hints to the conflicts that lie within him. Although a weakness is determined by individual standards, Victor possessed strong weaknesses in him through his compulsiveness with his studies and creations, his inability to hold and respect relationships, and his calloused heart.

As a man of extraordinary talent and knowledge, Victor was challenged with the necessary ability to hold himself back from diving in and being drowned by the world of science and its marvels. Since "in a scientific pursuit there is food for discovery and wonder," (30) he found himself in the midst of a search for the unknown, and seemingly impossible to find, secret to life. Victor became indulged in the idea that he could recreate life using body parts from corpses and in some way spark life into this newly united body. Although a challenge like this seems admirable, Victor changed an exciting endeavor into hours of driving himself to create the dream creation he fixed his mind on making. As time went on, Victor became obsessed with his experiment and rarely, if ever, left his apartment. His compulsiveness with his work, took him away from the world and society. In the novel he even admits to his listeners "stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst [he] I was yet engaged in the laboratory" (29). Since he became so involved with his work, he became weak and eventually was struck with an almost fatal illness and an "anxiety that almost amounted to agony" (34). His

inability to control himself and his "eagerness which perpetually increased" (33) with his studies and creations was a weakness that Victor could not conquer and it led to distress and serious illness.

A man who must live in this world must also bare the responsibility to relate to those around them. Man cannot be successful and reach its dreams without being able to fall back on those around them. Victor lacked the ability to allow people to come within his sphere of comfort and to touch his life. Elizabeth, the one woman who possessed the key to Victor's heart was forced to wait to unlock his love because he moved around and avoided making the commitment and opening the door to life to her. Yet, he "smiled with such kindness and affection that [he] I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature: they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as [he] I had never before experienced... and [he] withdrew... unable to bear these emotions" (75). Victor was able to do something that no other human had done before; he created another living being that would also have to live in this world and survive. Yet, because of Victor's lack of trust in people, he followed his own example and again ran away from developing a relationship that was much needed and would have kept much misery from ever arriving in his life and of those around him. He longed for an attachment with something but inevitably found out that "to be friendless is indeed to be unfortunate" (95). He also took advantage of the love his father had for him. No matter what the conflict or event was that sprang up in the life of Victor, his father was there to support or rescue him. Henry Clavel, a childhood friend of Victor's helped to nurse him back to health after his treacherous illness almost stole his life. However, the reader does not see nor understand the depth of love and respect Victor has for his friend until he is killed and snatched from his life. His lack of effort in maintaining and respecting the giving of those around him becomes a weakness that leaves a constant void in Victor's life.

A heart of humans has the ability to conquer, to lead, to love and to define one's life. Yet, that same heart's power is threatened with callousness and lack of attention. Once the heart is calloused over, the pricks of joy, peace, love, triumph and numerous other gifts of life become unnoticed and no longer felt. Victor's heart had become quite similar to this situation. Although he was able to love and to fear he was still stubborn and

unnecessarily demanding of himself. He was also “solitary and abhorred” (93). When the monster, which was made by his own hands, pursued him in order to humble himself for forgiveness of the murder of William. Yet, because Victor’s heart was so hard and he was unable to let go of the seemingly deep grudge he was holding against the monster, he did not fulfill his promise to recreate another monster in order to supply him with someone that would have a relationship with him. His hard heart also pushed people away. The calloused heart of Victor became a deep cavity between him and the world.

Weaknesses may lie within each of us but none are more apparent than those of Victor Frankenstein. His lack of cooperation with the world and his inward drive to become a creator of life left him with a miserable existence entangled in the loss of loved ones, his heart, and his world.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York. Dover Publications, Inc., 1993.



Illustrator: Sonny Norton

A Portrait of a Soldier

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MAJOR ROLES:

Pausanias
Herodotus

MINOR ROLES:

Messenger
Aristodemos

The crimson sun slowly rose over the horizon, casting streaks of fire across the blue heavens. Smoke arose into the morning light, as countless fires burned upon the cold earth. The golden hue of armor glistened in the sunlight, the armor of countless Spartans having been polished hours before. Adamantly they stood, their formation and discipline perfected, every man being the living portrait of a Spartan soldier. Nonetheless, they waited silently as the day began to unfold upon the Platatian soil, having waited for this day to come... the day of liberation!

Swords held in hand, they watched as the Persians marched before them, yet their discipline remained in spite of the massive force-marching toward them. It could be said that every man was the ideal soldier, except for the one amidst the ranks.

HERODOTUS: "Hail king of the Spartans, Hail Pausatnias who dares to war against the Persian swine, how goes the day my friend?"

PAUSANIAS: "Well, as any man would in times of war, and you?"

drama

HERODOTUS: "The same, it would do me well to speak to you upon the battles eve, if my intrusion and distractions be permitted?"

PAUSANIAS: "There is no offense, tell me...how does the other Greeks fair?"

HERODOTUS: "They are ready too for battle, yet none look as prepared as the soldiers you have assembled this day."

PAUSANIAS: "Indeed, they are the best that Sparta can afford to send in such times, may God give us the glory of victory."

HERODOTUS: "Aye, one have assembled so well, yet other kings dare to question their superiority in the field."

PAUSANIAS: "Then that is their mistake, our superiority shall be proved this day to all!"

Moments pass as the Persian approach; however, their efforts are slow and cautious as they draw nearer.

PAUSANIAS: "Hah! The Persian swine rightfully fear us, well founded after what we did to them at Thermopylai."

PAUSANIAS: "Indeed, it was glorious battle for all of Greeks."

Pausanias pauses as if contemplating what was said, shrugging to himself he returns his attention to the Persian march.

Herodotus observes the many Spartan men before him, all of who were finely arrayed in the exception of one.

HERODOTUS: "May I inquire as to who that man is...the one who bares the strangely decorated banner."

PAUSANIAS: "He is a trembler, all of who are ordained in such manner."

HERODOTUS: "Forgive me, but...a trembler?"

PAUSANIAS: "A simple coward that is all."

HERODOTUS: "A coward? What is his name?"

PAUSANIAS: "It is unfortunate enough for me to know the man, his name is Aristodemos."

PAUSANIAS: "He was one of the three hundred who fought at Thermopylai, he was the only one that survived."

HERODOTUS: "Was he captured, or did he simply flee like any coward would?"

PAUSANIAS: "Nay, he claims to have become direly ill upon the eve of battle, he also claims to have been ordered to retire." Pausanias spits in disgust, and after a few moments pass he returns his attention to the advancing Persians.

The Persians advance suddenly ends as they quickly place wicker shields before them, soon afterward followed by a wave of countless arrows, which flew into the Spartan line.

PAUSANIAS: "Cowards! They hide behind their pathetic wooden shields..."

Wave after wave of arrows pour into the Spartan ranks as many began to fall.

HERODOTUS: "Good King, issue the order to attack now less the battle be already lost!"

PAUSANIAS: "Silence! It is I alone who issues the order and is my decision when to attack... Messenger, sent the order to..."

Pausing, Pausanias looks upon the massive Persian force, and also upon the fallen Greeks. His thought became lost within the eerie scene, his eyes filled with doubt, his face basked in fear.

MESSENGER: "Sir? The order Sir?"

Pausanias does not answer as the screams of the dying echoed about, wiping his forehead with a trembling hand he fails to respond.

MESSENGER: "Sir? Please, what is your order?"

HERODOTUS: "The battle is already lost, issue the order to retreat..."

Countless men had fallen as more began to topple over, nonetheless discipline held if only barely. Suddenly a cry rang out amid the screams of the fallen, reaching

above the wails.

ARISTODEMOS: "FOR GREECE!!!"

Thus with a shout, Aristodemus drove forward with sword and shield in hand, soon followed by the rest of the Spartans. Onward he rushed and plunged into the Persian ranks, cutting down many until his life was lost.

It was by his act of courage that the Spartans won the day, repelling back the Persians and ending the threat of invasion.

HERODOTUS: "Was that not Aristodemus who dare charge"
Was that not the trembler who was first to enter the fray? Surely, he was the bravest man this day."

PAUSANIAS: "Perhaps Aristodemus showed bravery this day, but he lacked discipline and the will to follow orders, he will be forgotten as will all who exemplify such."

Just Another Guy

NICK STEIN

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CHARACTERS:

MARK- a young male, wearing dress pants and a button up shirt

WILLIE- an old, dirty vagrant wearing tattered clothes

DRUNK MAN #1- stereotypical drunk guy

DRUNK MAN #2- stereotypical drunk buddy of drunk man #1

COP #1

COP #2

The stage is set as an old, run down corner store front. Two young, intoxicated men in front talk to each other in mumbled voices but exaggerated body movement and gesticulation. Another older man, Willie, stand a few feet from them with sunglasses on and a cup in his hand. The shine of headlights can be seen at the left of the stage. A young man, Mark, dressed entirely too nice to be going to a store like this enters from the left looking troubled and cursing under his breath.

MARK: Excuse me, is there a pay phone around here?

DRUNK MAN #1: Go inside, all the way to the back. It's right up next to the bathroom.

[Mark walks hurriedly and nervously inside the store. The men outside resume their mumbled conversation. In the distance, faint sirens slowly grow louder, then fade away. As a couple walks by the store, the man in sunglasses shakes his tin can in their direction and the jingling of change is heard.]

WILLIE: Spare some change for an old blind man?

[A coin is dropped in his cup, and he gives a thankful

nod as the couple continues on their way.]

DRUNK MAN #1: That boy just drove up got smoke comin from his hood, Willie.

WILLIE: You shore it ain't steam?

[The drunk man stumbles over to the left of the stage and after taking a look, turns around a bit too fast. He nearly falls, but regains his balance at the last possible moment, and walks back to the front of the store, seeming oblivious to his loss of coordination.]

DRUNK MAN #1: Dat's steam, Willie. How'd you know?

WILLIE: I can still hear his radiator whistlin.

DRUNK MAN #2: (shoving the other drunk man) I done told you Willie smart.

DRUNK MAN #1: I ain't never say he wasn't smart.

[The door to the gas station swings open.]

MARK: Damnit!

DRUNK MAN #2: What's yo problem?

MARK: (quietly and without looking at the man)
Nothing, I'm just waiting on a ride.

WILLIE: (Shaking his cup) Spare some change for an old blind man?

MARK: (pulling some change from his coat pocket)
Sure.

WILLIE: Somebody comin to getcha, boy?

MARK: Yeah, my car just started smoking and my wife is half an hour away, and...

Boom!

[A gun can be heard firing, followed by a woman's screams from the right side of the stage. Mark appears panicky as he moves closer to the door. The drunk men look suddenly awakened and they strain their necks trying to see what happened while moving to the right and off stage.]

DRUNK MAN #2: She dead. She don't need no ambulance.

MARK: (with a shaky voice) Um, what just happened?

DRUNK MAN #2: Some girl got shot. They took her purse and her shoes too.

MARK: Oh my God! What should we do?

WILLIE: (Sarcastically) What can we do?

[The drunk men begin to mumble at a low volume again. Sirens can be heard again, but this time they don't fade away. When they finally stop, blue lights can be seen flashing upon the stage. Two policemen approach the store nonchalantly.]

COP 1: Who called 911?

DRUNK MAN #1: (pointing to the door) In there.

[Cop #1 walks inside. Mark checks his watch, then checks again.]

COP #2: did anybody see anything?

DRUNK MAN #2: (excitedly) I seen everything man. I swear I seen it! De was runnin and...

COP #2: Come over here and let me get a statement from you.

[The two walk off stage to the left. The other drunk man sits on the ground with his back to the wall and appears to go to sleep.]

WILLIE: It's about time for you to get goin, ain't it boy?

MARK: I'm waiting on my wife. She should be here in a few minutes.

WILLIE: Good luck with yo car.

MARK: Thanks

[The cop walks out of the store and addresses Mark.]

COP #1: Did you see what happened?

MARK: I didn't see anything. I just heard a shot and a scream.

COP #1: (looking at Willie) what about y...Oh I'm sorry.

WILLIE: Spare some change for an old blind man?

COP #1: Sorry, all out.

[The cop walks off stage to the left. The drunk man by the wall has apparently fallen over and passed out. A puddle of cheap wine surrounds his overturned bottle, and it looks like blood in the glow of the fluorescent lights. Willie takes a few steps forward, bends over, and picks up a quarter from the ground.]

MARK: How did you see that quarter on the ground?

WILLIE: I heard it fall when that cop dropped it.

[Mark reaches in his pocket and removes a lighter. He tosses it at Willie, who quickly grabs the lighter before it hits his face.]

MARK: You're not blind! I dropped that quarter when I came out of the store. I just didn't pick it back up because of all the filth on the ground around here. You're just lying to people for money! I hope you burn in Hell for this! Why don't you get a job you lazy bum!

WILLIE: Do you know how hard it is for a man like me to get a job?

MARK: I've got a job! The clerk inside has a job! The only reason you don't is that you're lazy and you want to live off of those of us who are worth something.

WILLIE: Why am I not worth anything?

MARK: Look at you! Sitting her in front of a gas station, hanging out with a bunch of drunks. You people make me sick!

WILLIE: (angry) Look at you! With your nice clothes and your nice car! Looking down on us like a bunch of animals! I may not be blind, but you are! You're blind to the world around you. Do you think I like this neighborhood? I wish I really was blind, so I wouldn't have to see the things that go on around me everyday. So I wouldn't have seen that boy in the black coat shoot that girl just then. Not everybody was

given the same opportunities you were. I've tried to get out of here, but it's the people like you that hold me in. They see me as nothing more than a waste, and so that's what I've become. If you'd open your eyes a little bit, we might all have better lives!

[The two men stare at each other in silence for a few moments. The drunk man rolls over a bit and lets out a low moan. One of the cops walks back towards Mark and Willie.]

COP #1: Are you sure you didn't see anything? This all happened across the street for Christ's sake!

[Mark stares at Willie for a couple of seconds. Willie stares into the blank space in front of him.]

MARK: (to the cop) I think I saw a guy in a black jacket running away.

COP #1: What else?

MARK: That's it.

COP #1: That's it?

MARK: That's it.

[The cop shakes his head in disapproval and walks off stage to the right. Willie looks as if he is about to say something, but Mark speaks up first.]

MARK: I'm sorry about what all I said, but I still don't think you should lie about being blind.

WILLIE: I don't neither. But I am sure you do things you know are wrong.

[A few more moments of silence ensue. Then, Mark takes his hand out of his pocket and reaches towards Willie.]

MARK: My name's Mark.

Willie: Willie

[The two men shake hands. Headlights can be seen pulling up on the left side of the stage.]

MARK: That's my ride... Um, have a good night Willie.

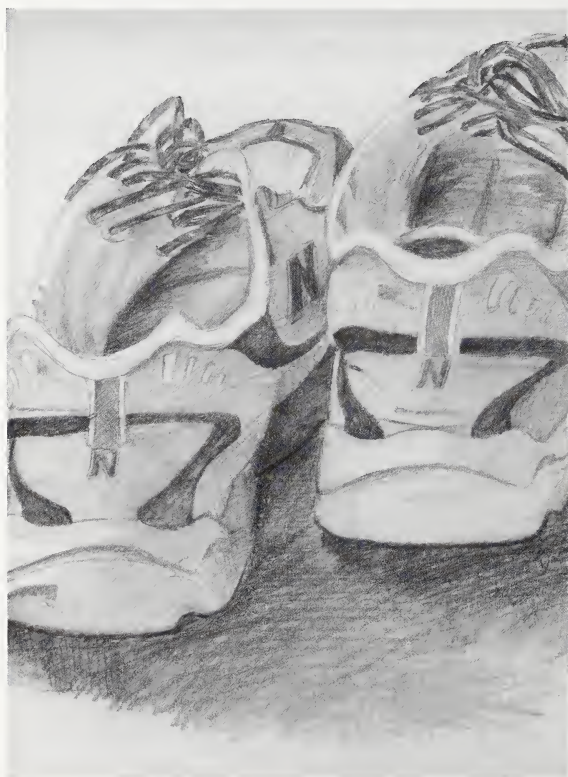
WILLIE: Good luck with yo car.

[Mark walks off stage to the left and from that direction, voices are heard.]

WOMAN: (disgustingly) Who was that creep you were shaking hands with?

MARK: He's just another guy that's down on his luck, that 's all.

*Curtains drop dramatically
Audience roars with applause
[Standing Ovation]*



Illustrator: David Russell

Thanks-Giving

RANDALL KING

COPIAH-LINCOLN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The interior of an American home, inside two rooms can be seen: the living room and behind, underneath a mahogany archway was the dining room. The living area is stocked well for a middle class American family, but there is no television. The entire room is ordained in mahogany items but it is set off by the radio and a six-foot, mahogany grandfather clock whose golden pendulum continues to chime away at the time.

(The time on the clock is 11:30. In the dining room a woman enters, MARGARET WALKER, and begins to set the table. She is in her late forties. She has curly, auburn hair and wears a Sunday dress. Her husband, PETER WALKER, enters the living room from the hallway. He is wearing a dress shirt and tie. The tie is too short and the shirt is uncomfortably new and stiff.)

PETER: Margaret! (He stops at the mirror and begins to adjust his tie.) *This...darn it...this tie is too small for me.*

MARGARET: *It's not around your neck for looks Honey. It's there for sentimental reasons. (She exits to the kitchen. PETER stretches his head around the corner to make sure the door is shut, and moves quickly to the liquor cabinet, opens some whiskey, and takes a large swallow from the bottle.)*

PETER: Melody bought this tie for me ten years ago. If it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit.

MARGARET: (Hollering from the kitchen) *It fits well enough, and don't touch the liquor. We have company coming over and Bro. and Sis. Jackson doesn't drink.*

PETER: Yes dear!

(He takes an even larger drink from the bottle, grimaces and returns it to the liquor cabinet. He slug-

gishly walks to a recliner, the dominant American male throne, and instead of sitting back he slumps allowing his head to hang down. MARGARET enters lavishly, her company mode in full throttle. She carries an imitation china tea set with coffee inside.)

MARGARET: It's almost over, Honey. (She kneels down, leans her head under his, and kisses him on the lips.)

PETER: Will it be...over?

(They stare at each other quietly has the clocks movements become more evident. The clicks of the clock rise in volume—11:35. Three hard knocks ram on the door.)

MARGARET: They're here. Good. No...wait, I have to get ready.

PETER: Get ready? You look good enough for two church services and wedding. What do you have to do now?

MARGARET: (Harshly) Answer the door—Peter. (She exits to the kitchen adjusting her hair.)

PETER: Yeah, I'll get the door, and you do what's more important. Like playing with that mop on your head.

(PETER opens the front door. THOMAS and SUSAN JACKSON enter. THOMAS is a man in his fifties with bulky army style glasses. His wife is considerably older than him with blonde dye and gray roots in her hair. She rubs one of PETER'S arms while her husband shakes the other hand excitedly.)

THOMAS: Pete. It's so glad to see ya again. I'm, we, are so glad it's almost here.

SUSAN: We've been praying for you and Margaret. You know we love you.

PETER: Thank you both. (He kisses SUSAN on the cheek. He is polite but the tone in his voice is dull.) Come in and have some coffee. It's cold out there tonight.

(They sit in the chairs surrounding the coffee. PETER returns to his recliner but this time sits up straight and in control.)

THOMAS: Well, you know...(Trying to break the silence)

SUSAN: Aww, look at how good the place looks, I just love this wood.

(MARGARET enters through the dining room carrying a plate of cookies. She is now wearing a white, flower covered apron capitalizing on the classic American homemaker. PETER rolls his eyes when he notices it.)

MARGARET: Bro. and Sis. Jackson, you're here.

SUSAN: Oh, Margaret. I was just complimenting your living room. I love this wood. What is it called again? Moohoogany?

MARGARET: Mahogany.

SUSAN: Well, it looks like it came from something...well...beautiful.

(She laughs shamefully. Everyone remains quiet. The clock drowns out the silence as it counts the time as 11:43)

MARGARET: Have you heard from Chris? Is he still coming to be with us tonight?

THOMAS: He'll probably...

SUSAN: He'll be here because here is where I'm at. He needs me right now.

THOMAS: We don't know what he's doing tonight, honestly.

SUSAN: And I'm here for him too.

THOMAS: He said he was going to be there tonight. He thinks we should have all went to the...

SUSAN: Just like I'm here for you.

PETER: (Regretfully) I should have been there.

THOMAS: I wouldn't want to drive that far back from something like that.

MARGARET: At least we're at home celebrating. We're comfortable with good snacks and good coffee instead of in some dank government building.

PETER: (Angrily) It doesn't matter what the circumstances I should be there for...for her. (Margaret rubs his

hands to soothe him.)

THOMAS: Pete you know we love her like she was our daughter.

SUSAN: And Chris loves her too.

THOMAS: God's got a time and place for everything, and an answer for everything. When that clock points straight up, it'll be time for his answer to this.

SUSAN: God is always with us, and always for us.

PETER: *You are right.* (He forces a smile upon his face but his voice still has a dull fake tone.)

MARGARET: It's best for just a few people to share this.

THOMAS: I just hope Chris decides to come here instead of driving all the way to the...

SUSAN: He'll be here. He needs me. He's my only child and I'd never let anything happen to him.

THOMAS: (Embarrassed) *Susan!*

PETER: *It's all right Tom. I used to say the same thing about Melody. I wish she were here. If she was, I would grab a hold to that girl, and never let anyone come within a few feet, and if they did...* (His tone turns from dull to heated. He stands up with his coffee cup in his hands, unaware he is shaking it violently. MARGARET places her hand on his arm, calming him and gently swaying him to sit back down.) *I should have been there.*

THOMAS: I wish she were here. I wish we were celebrating the union of our two families, but instead we're celebrating the end to...

SUSAN: This mess. God will sort this out for us and it will be done.

MARGARET: Amen.

(The celebration returns to silence. The decorous clock reads 11:48. On the wall behind the clock is a huge flag proclaiming largely what the state always proclaims—we are Texans. A knock raps on the door. This time the knocks are soft and unmotivated.)

SUSAN: It's my baby.

PETER: I'll get it.

SUSAN: I told you he would come to me.

(PETER answers the door. All three of his companions follow behind him, standing way to close. CHRIS enters the living room with a solemn look attached to his face. Sympathetic greetings abound him as he makes his way to a chair.)

SUSAN: You look so pale. Did you eat anything today baby?

CHRIS: No, Mom. I didn't.

SUSAN: Well, I raised you to know that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

THOMAS: (Annoyed) Susan, it's a little late to be worrying about breakfast.

SUSAN: It's never too...

THOMAS: He has got bigger issues than...

SUSAN: Well, breakfast is important. That's all...

CHRIS: Mom! Dad! Please don't do the back and forth thing. Not now. Please!

MARGARET: *Speaking of food.* (Changing the subject)

SUSAN: The cake!

MARGARET: The cake. Susan would you help me get it out? It's almost time.

(Everyone turns and stares at the clock—11:50. MARGARET and SUSAN exit through the dining room to the kitchen.)

THOMAS: (Singing) *Dust on the bible, dust on the holy word.*
(Clears his throat) *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, a sound that...*

CHRIS: I drove up there today.

(THOMAS and PETER lean on the edge of their chairs and become very attentive.)

PETER: Did you go in?

CHRIS: No. (Tears form at the base of his eyes.) *I couldn't get out of the car.*

THOMAS: The lord gives us strength and then again, he gives us our weaknesses too.

(CHRIS pulls out a pint of liquor from his jacket and takes a shot straight from the bottle. He gestures the bottle toward the other men. They happily receive the liquor into their coffee.)

THOMAS: *Some weaknesses can be a blessing.* (He downs the cup and holds it out for a refill.)

CHRIS: If I had gone in I probably would have caused a big scene. I don't know what I would have done, but I know I wouldn't be quite if I saw him. Melody wouldn't want me to act that way though. She was always so calm and cool, no matter what.

PETER: She was a better person than any of us could ever be. My daughter—the angel.

(The women enter the dining room talking loudly, while merrily dancing around the table setting up the cake and utensils.)

SUSAN: Come on boys. The cake is ready. Lets say a prayer before we celebrate.

(They all gather around the dining room table.)

MARGARET: Would you give thanks Peter? We still have a lot to be thankful for.

(Each one bows their heads and stand in silence as PETER begins the prayer.)

PETER: Dear lord, we have come here tonight to thank you for an end. As you know our two families are no longer one. There is someone missing. In your wisdom you took our daughter and our wife. You have done this so many times to many different people, and we know we are not special, so we don't ask why. And we didn't ask for vengeance, but in your grace you have given us that vengeance tonight, and for that we are thankful.

Thankful that we serve a powerful and merciful god who takes an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

SUSAN: Hallelujah.

PETER: Thank you lord for your many blessings and keep Melody safe and warm in your arms tonight.

CHRIS: And let that murderer burn in hell tonight.

THOMAS: Vengeance is mine. Sayeth the lord.

PETER: Amen.

MARGARET: Amen.

(The clock finally reaches midnight. It announces the time with loud, nearly deafening chimes. The two families remain standing around the table. MARGARET falls into the chair behind her, and begins to cry.

CHRIS pounds slowly but forcibly onto the table, trying to hold back his emotions. After the strokes of midnight there is a silence of quiet weeping, but all have their heads down making it impossible to distinguish who it is. Suddenly the phone rings causing everyone to jump. PETER rushes to answer it.

PETER: Hello?...thank you...yes that's great news... thanks for being their for us reverend it means a lot to all of us...Yes, Chris is about as good as he can be...no thank you...alright, good bye.

(Everyone stands. They look at PETER impatiently waiting for some news.)

PETER: It's official. The SOB is dead.

(Their sad faces disappear. Smiles return. PETER walks over to MARGARET and hugs her.)

CHRIS: *(CHRIS slaps the table hard then cups his hands over his mouth. He leans back and screams.) I didn't think you would ever let it happen old man. It's about damn time.*

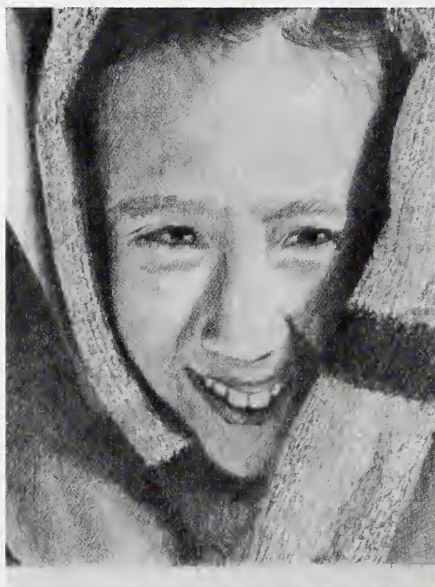
SUSAN: *(Sharply) CHRIS!*

(PETER pries away from his wife, and makes his way into the living room. Where a TV would be expected to

sit an old but classic radio from the thirties took its place. Its golden, arch speakers rise elegantly above the pearl colored controls and are housed in a beautiful mahogany finish. He plays with the controls until the static from the air plays out and a new report can be heard.)

NEWS ANNOUNCER: (Off screen) Ladies and gentlemen you just heard the Warden of the Texas State Pentintrey. He has made it official. At exactly twelve-midnight, central time zone, Frank Smith was put to death by the Electric Chair. He was convicted for the murder, rape and dismemberment of twenty-three year old Melody Jackson. She is survived by her husband Chris Jackson, and her parents, Peter and Margaret Walker. Our prayers go out to them tonight. Texas justice has been served once again.

CURTAIN



Illustrator: David Russell

